

The Journey

GOD'S WORD FOR DAILY LIVING



SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER 2022



Bible Reading Fellowship

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

**Give us courage to allow it to transform our lives
and enable us to grow more and more into the
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 Bible Reading Fellowship is deeply grateful to all who have so generously contributed to this issue of The Journey, especially the writers: **Shirley R. MacNaughton** (Acts of the Apostles), **Mildred Green** (Life with God in the Psalms), **David Lord** (Ephesians), and **Kevin Martin** (Advent Study: Discipleship). We are also extremely grateful to **J. Keith Miller** who so generously allowed us to quote from his writings for Sabbath Times.



The Acts of the Apostles

Chapters 17-28

Thursday, September 1

Read: Acts 17:1-15

Upside Down

In the car on the way home from church, the mother asked the inevitable question of her small son, “What did you learn in Sunday School today?” The child hesitated and then proudly replied, “Well, we’re learning the names of the books of the Bible from Matthew to Revolutions.”

The reputation which followed Paul and his companions was that they were revolutionaries. “These men who have turned the world upside down” (v.6). The charge which their enemies often brought against them was that they created political unrest and followed a different king. In one sense there was great truth in those charges. Paul proclaimed a Jesus who had spoken of citizenship in a new kingdom. Paul preached a Savior who asked a revolutionary new way of life of those who believed in him.

A pattern which becomes increasingly familiar is seen in the ministry of Paul and his team. As they move from one major city to another, they find an initial welcome in the synagogue. Their message is accepted by some of the Jews and by even more Gentiles connected to the synagogues. Then opposition begins to build and finally bursts into overt hostility which forces them to leave, often in fear of their lives. They leave behind a church, a body of persons who continue the witness for Jesus Christ. These new Christians become a part of the revolutionary movement which turns worlds—social, economic, religious and personal worlds—upside down.

Are we seen as people who turn the world upside down or do we accept the world’s wisdom and sense of values and ways of dealing with people? Perhaps one measure of our growing Christian

maturity is the extent to which we have allowed ourselves to be filled with the mind of Jesus (Ephesians 4:23-24) and to live the revolutionary life to which he calls.

R&D *Do your Christian faith and witness ever disturb anyone? Why or why not?*

Prayer: *Make us bold in our witness to you, Lord Jesus, regardless of the circumstances we face.*

Friday, September 2

Read: Acts 17:16-33

The Known God

The ordinary tourist can be stunned by the beauty and the creative genius which formed the beautiful and ancient statues of Greek gods and goddesses. When Paul arrived in Athens, however, he had a very different reaction to the beautiful statuary. His “spirit was provoked within him” (v.16). Amidst all these statues of gods, he was upset and disturbed over the lack of knowledge of the one and only God.

Once the political and commercial center of Greece, Athens was a city in decline commercially, living on its reputation of the past. It remained, however, an important university city and a center for the teaching of the numerous and pagan mystery religions. A sophisticated, intellectual university town full of philosophers and teachers, Athens was a curious mixture of superstitious idolatry and enlightened philosophy.

Paul’s early preaching in the marketplace earned him the contemptuous name of the “babbler,” a term used for a bird picking up scraps in the gutter or of persons who acquired mere scraps of learning. However, in their desire for new ideas (v.21), the Athenians brought Paul before the Areopagus, the council which passed on those allowed to teach in the city, for a hearing.

Facing the Athenians’ attitude of intellectual snobbery, Paul preached to these Greeks where they were, without compromising his message and using some of their own beliefs and the words of their philosophers within his witness (v.28). Using the Athenians’ altar to the unknown god as his basis for his proclamation, he pro-

ceeded to tell them who God really is. God is known (v.23)! God is creator of all!

While not needing man, God still made man to be in relationship with Himself (vv.24-29). Man's ignorance of God was formerly overlooked. Now repentance for that ignorance is necessary because God is judge. The agent of God's judgment and salvation from ignorance has already come in the man Jesus, whom God raised from the dead (vv.18, 30-31).

R&D How willing am I to stand before the sophisticated, intellectually elitist of my world and witness about Jesus Christ? What would I say?

Prayer: Holy Father, what I am not competent to say, You can say through me by Your Holy Spirit within me.

Saturday, September 3

Read: Acts 18:1-5

God's Friend (1)

A delightful book of prayers written by children contains this gem: "Dear God, is Reverend Coe a friend of yours, or do you just know him through business? Donny." God certainly knew Paul through business. Paul had been given a commission and he devoted all his energy to carrying it out (9:5-6, 15-16). But God also knew Paul "up close and personal" in friendship with ultimate care for Paul's needs.

Leaving Athens, Paul needed encouragement and reassurance. Is it any wonder! How much had he already endured physically and emotionally (2 Corinthians 11:23ff)! In his mission in Athens, he had experienced, if not failure, at best only slight success. Then, immediately upon arriving in Corinth, Paul received a powerful source of encouragement. Priscilla and Aquila, Christian Jews from Rome, offered him friendship. They were to become lifelong friends and coworkers (18:18-28; Romans 16:3-5; 1 Corinthians 16:19). Priscilla and Aquila were some of those wonderful Christians whose heart and hands and home were devoted to Christ and they shared those same gifts with Paul.

Powerful and supportive Christian friends are one of the blessings of God. Then Silas and Timothy arrived from Berea (Macedonia), giving Paul additional support and encouragement (v.5). In addition, they brought gifts from the Macedonian churches enabling Paul to devote full time to the Lord's work once again (2 Corinthians 11:9; Philippians 4:14-16).

R&D How have I experienced the blessings of Christian friendship in my life? In what ways is it different from any other friendships?

Prayer: Lord, help those of us who are "just laypeople" to see that You fully equip us for ministry...and especially ministry to one another as we seek to serve.

Sunday, September 4

Sabbath Time

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Romans 7:15

What Paul seems to have done in his meetings (and in his letters) was to throw open the windows of his life and let some live sins and weaknesses fly out, feathers and all—some real, current problems that he was still struggling with. This way people could actually see God working before their eyes. That was first hand, contemporary evidence to his audiences that God was alive.

Monday, September 5

Read: Acts 18:5-22

God's Friend (2)

Paul needed more than human reassurance and encouragement. We can only speculate on the reason for Paul's deep need. It may have been the evil permeating the city. Corinth, which was large and important, a center for trade and travel, also had a reputation for terrible wickedness and corruption. Its religions were laced with immorality. Many itinerant teachers of new religions preyed on the superstitious and ignorant Corinthians.

Or, Paul's need for encouragement may have been caused by the unyielding and intractable opposition of the Jews. Forcing Paul out of the synagogue in Corinth did not satisfy them. A change in government with a new proconsul found the Jews bringing charges

against Paul for teaching an illegal religion. They hoped for his expulsion from the city. They may even have threatened his life again. During this harrowing time Paul found that even the strong support of human friends was not enough. The friend and companion who walked with Paul, the Spirit of the Lord, heartened and emboldened him (vv.9-10).

There is nothing more common in life than periods of discouragement. We work very hard for something, something that appears to be God's will for us, and through no fault of our own, we seem unable to do or to be what is needed. Two things often contribute to our feelings of discouragement. First, we anticipate that because we love the Lord, look to Him for guidance, are honest and have integrity in our dealings with others, we will escape the hurts which the world pours upon us. Our false and unrealistic expectation is that God will shield us from the world. A second contributor to discouragement is that when something bad does happen, we experience a helplessness to do anything about it and we feel that nothing good can come out of it.

A simple poem speaks to those false expectations: "God hath not promised Skies always blue, Flower-strewn pathways All our lives Through. God hath not promised Sun without rain, Joy without sorrow, Peace without pain. But God hath promised Strength for the day, Rest for the labor, Light for the way, Grace for the trials, Help from above, Unfailing sympathy, Undying love" (Annie Johnson Flint). These are the things that friends of God can expect.

R&D What are the false expectations in my relationship with Jesus Christ? What real support have I experienced from Christian friends and/or God's Spirit directly?

Prayer: Help us to remember, Lord God, in the midst of any disappointment or loss, that You are with us, that You love us, and that despite the pain of the night there can be joy in the morning.

Read: Acts 18:23—19:7

An Unusual Disciple

Paul's travels continue, and some 1,500 miles will be covered before he returns to Ephesus. In the meanwhile, the mission in Ephesus continues without him through the ministry of Priscilla and Aquila (vv.18-19, 26).

Suddenly a new name appears on the scene, Apollos. He seemed to have all of the necessary and admirable attributes for success. He was extremely well-educated in Alexandria, the "Oxford" of the ancient world. He was strikingly articulate, powerful in explaining the Scriptures, instructed in Christianity. And he taught accurately about Jesus. He is described as "fervent in spirit," a phrase in use in the early church to describe someone literally possessed by the Holy Spirit. But his faith was, in some way, incomplete.

There is no consensus among Bible scholars concerning Apollos. Did he know Jesus only intellectually? Or did he know Jesus personally through the Spirit? Did he know Jesus only as a historical person of the past? Or did he know Jesus as a personal living savior? That he knew of Jesus, even though his knowledge was incomplete, and that he recognized from Scripture that Jesus was the Messiah, was not in doubt. Yet Apollos lacked something which was supplied to him by the grace of God in the ministry of Priscilla and Aquila. Through the channel of their ministry, he became fully equipped for ministry of his own.

The incomplete knowledge of Apollos is remindful of some Christians today. There are some who accept the historical facts of the Christian faith, but they have never made a personal commitment to Christ. There are some who have committed themselves to Christ, but who still attempt to live a Christian life through their own power. There are some who have made the commitment, depend upon the Holy Spirit for power, but have never taken the time and energy or had the opportunity to hear accurately about "the way of the Lord" (v.25).

R&D *Do I find myself in any of the above groups? If so, what are the steps that I need to take to live more completely as a Christian?*

Prayer: *Help us realize, Lord Jesus, that life in you is a growing process throughout our time here on earth, and may we be growing in the knowledge and love of you every day.*

Wednesday, September 7

Read: Acts 19:1-7

Not Optional Equipment

Returning to Ephesus, Paul finds twelve peculiar disciples. (There is no consensus among the commentators as to whether these men were disciples of Jesus or John the Baptist.) They did, however, know and believe something about Jesus, however inadequate or incomplete their belief. Paul's concern is to fully equip these disciples to believe and live in Christ. He shares with them the gift of God given "when you believed" (v.2). Then, in the only instance of rebaptism in the New Testament, Paul has them baptized. They receive the Holy Spirit at the laying on of Paul's hands.

These twelve Ephesian disciples were not fully equipped to be followers of Jesus. Intellectual assent to Jesus as the Messiah could not empower a life in Christ. Knowing the baptism of John (Mark 1:1-10), repenting of their sins and desiring to live a different and better life could not empower a life in Christ. Paul also knew what it was to repent. He also knew that the power to move on from repentance into a new life came not from within himself but from Jesus Christ through his Holy Spirit (Romans 7:15-8:2).

It may be that we, too, have repented but find ourselves powerless to live for Christ. It may be that we are trying to live by our own power. The Holy Spirit is not optional equipment for the Christian. He is the basic package with whom we will live a triumphant, liberated, abundant life.

R&D *What can I do to live a more power-filled life?*

Prayer: *Come, Holy Spirit, and empower my life as a follower of Christ.*

Read: Acts 19:8-20

Authentic Leadership

By the way that he used the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul is revealed to be an authentic leader. Paul's primary concern was to introduce all people to Jesus Christ and to lead them into a personal relationship with him. His message was of the unsearchable richness of Christ (Ephesians 3:8) which would fill all voids in their lives and meet all their needs. And Paul, like Jesus and Peter and the other apostles, also saw the physical needs and pains of people and was a healing agent for health and wholeness. His authenticity as a leader showed itself in the fact that the power given to him was used for others and not for himself.

There were other leaders in that society, however, as well as in our own, who sought and used power, not to benefit others but to benefit themselves. Such persons are exemplified in the sons of Sceva.

Aware that Paul's power came through "the Jesus whom Paul preaches" (v.13), they attempted to manipulate that power and use it to benefit themselves without ever knowing Jesus or committing themselves to him. To that self-serving use of power the evil spirits responded, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" (v.15).

Lloyd Ogilvie comments on this passage, "Evil cannot cast out evil. The evil spirit recognized the self-serving exploitation engaged in by the sons of Sceva. Only a person in whom Jesus lives has the power to use His name in prayer and healing" (*The Communicator's Commentary*).

Can this passage serve as a warning to choose our leaders more carefully? One of the essential elements in the character of a leader is integrity. A by-product of integrity is concern for the followers without gain to self. Leadership does have its benefits and brings its rewards; authentic leaders, however, do not diminish their followers in any way but rather help them increase as persons in all areas of their lives.

R&D *What are the criteria that I use to judge leaders?*

Prayer: *Bless Christian leaders, Lord, to see that their success is fully dependent on You.*

Friday, September 9

Read: Acts 19:21-41

No Other Gods

Ephesus was the home of one of the wonders of the ancient world, the temple of Artemis. Artemis was an ancient goddess, who was conceived of as the protector of wild creatures and as “queen and huntress, chaste and fair.” By Paul’s time, she had evolved into a strange combination of earth mother, fertility goddess, a grotesque, squat figure of multiple breasts and also (strangely) the goddess of banking and the protector of debtors. One of the important industries of Ephesus was that spawned by the worship of Artemis conducted by craftsmen and artisans who made small shrines containing an image of the goddess.

Paul’s message of a god not made with hands (v.26) struck a blow at the industries dependent upon the worship of Artemis for their business. Sales of shrines and images declined as Christianity made inroads into the hearts and minds of the Ephesians.

Threatened financially, the silversmiths began to riot. Their stated cause was the honor of Artemis, the pride of Ephesus. Their underlying motive was the fear of loss of wealth. The riot spread throughout the city ending in the great theater which held 25,000 persons. Here the town clerk, the executive officer of the city and the liaison between the city government and the Roman provincial administration, brought the mob under control with reasoned argument.

It is said that whatever you love the most is your god. It is also said that whatever you love more than God is your idol. Paul and the Christians in Ephesus found out just how loyal the silversmiths could be to their god.

R&D Is there any place in my life where my loyalty to Christ and my concern for my possessions are in conflict?

Prayer: *The love of power and money are deceptive evils as much in our time as at any time in the past. Guard us, Lord God, against anything that takes us away from You.*

Saturday, September 10

Read: Acts 20:1-2

Spiritual Correctness

We are often concerned about subjects being taught in our schools, including in our colleges and universities, that seem in conflict with our own convictions, whether they are theological or political. That concern can be centered both in what is being taught and in the interpretation of that subject matter. Who determines how subjects or events are to be interpreted? In such a debate, “truth” is often the principal victim.

On the other hand, in the early church, there was great need for “spiritual correctness,” great need for truthful teaching about the faith of Jesus Christ. It was necessary for those who knew the “whole gospel” (20:27) to share that with new converts. A view of Paul which sees him only as the great missionary seeking new converts for Christ is a view that is incomplete. Luke refers over and over to Paul’s work in strengthening, encouraging, and exhorting the congregations already established. Much of Paul’s time was spent in teaching the “truth” about Jesus to those who already believed.

How essential it is that we know what is true about Jesus Christ! We are living with limited resources when, as Christians, we are limited in our knowledge of Scripture and the teachings of the church. How can we tell what is true or false about God or how He works with us? How do we know what is real or imitation? How do we react to a culture that is always presenting us with new ways of thinking, new ways of acting? William Willimon wrote, “Weak, inarticulate, unexamined beliefs lead to weak disciples. The Christian faith is considerably more than a mere intellectual exercise. But it is not less than an intellectual challenge. There are facts to be mastered, truths to be discerned, stories to be told right.”

R&D *What do I do to ensure that I know the truth about Jesus? Where do I find true teaching about my faith?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, that we have available to us readable Bibles and sound commentaries to show us the way You want us to live. May we ever avail ourselves of the resources You provide us that we may walk in the light and not in darkness.*

Sunday, September 11

Sabbath Time

And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me.
2 Corinthians 12:7

Paul's courage, as a perfectionist Pharisee, in admitting that even in Christ he couldn't be whole must have seemed like a real miracle. A man without a great inner source of security could never have been so personally vulnerable to people who might have rejected and even harmed him. This vulnerable style communicated great power, though the content was often failure and weakness, beyond which Paul could point to "hope."

Monday, September 12

Read: Acts 20:1-6

Put Something Aside

One of the fascinating things about the New Testament is the occasional list of names which appears. Here in verse 4 a list of names is included. When such a list appears, it is safe to assume that most other Christians, at the time of writing, would recognize the names and that the people named were leaders in their congregations.

A project which was very important to Paul was a collection of money for the financially poor church in Jerusalem which had fallen upon hard times. Through that collection he wanted to see the churches which he had founded give something back to the mother church which had provided the seed from which the other churches sprang. Paul also saw this collection as an opportunity to strengthen the bonds between the Jewish and Gentile churches.

Jesus said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matthew 6:21). People often incorrectly reverse the words

and say, “Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also.” Such a statement speaks the truth. We give money to the things we care about, to the people we love. However, that is not the truth to which Jesus pointed. Jesus knew that when you give money to something, your interest and your concern follow your money. It is that principle which makes Christian giving a spiritual matter, a spiritual tool. When we give our money to the Lord, our heart and concern go with it and our relationship with him is strengthened. This was a spiritual truth which Paul understood. Do we?

R&D *How do I react when money is talked about in the church?*

Prayer: *Everything we have is Yours, Lord God.*

Tuesday, September 13

Read: Acts 20:7-15

Paul and Eutychus

One of my clergy husband’s favorite stories is about a long-time, dedicated parishioner named Archie. Archie was a hardworking farmer with six children whose habit was to attend church each and every Sunday. Another habit he had was to sit right in front of the pulpit and go to sleep during every sermon. Jack had a reputation as a good preacher but no matter how hard he worked to keep Archie’s attention, Archie went to sleep. Jack finally gave up, thinking, as he said, that Archie needed sleep more than he needed to hear the sermon.

We might imagine that Paul never had to worry about keeping the attention of his listeners, yet even he had someone who went to sleep. In a somewhat humorous and unlikely setting, Luke pictures a worship service in the early church which culminates in a miracle.

It was evening and the hour grew later and later as Paul talked on and on. Eutychus, unable to stay awake during the sermon, fell asleep, slipped from the window where he was sitting, and fell three stories to his death. In abrupt fashion, Luke recounts how Paul stopped preaching, ran down to the street, and brought the young man back to life. Later, now reinforced by the miracle, he resumed his meeting with the congregation.

By this time, AD 56-57, Christians were beginning to develop their own pattern of worship. Departing from the Jewish custom of worship on the Sabbath, the seventh day, they met for worship on the first day of the week (v.7; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2). F. F. Bruce tells us that this is the earliest text to show that Christians came together regularly to worship on Sunday. Sunday was an ordinary day of routine work and worship began when work was done.

The believers met for a meal together “to break bread” (v.7), a meal which commemorated the death and resurrection of Jesus, but which was also a true meal in which everyone participated. All were included, slave and free, male and female, Jew and Gentile and there was a oneness in fellowship, a oneness in Christ. The meal is described as a “love feast,” an *agape*, where all shared in the fellowship.

R&D What are my feelings as I participate in Holy Communion? How aware am I of others around me?

Prayer: As difficult as it seems to be for us to concentrate both mentally and spiritually on what is going on around us in worship services, help us to be more attentive, Dear Lord.

Wednesday, September 14

Read: Acts 20:16-38

A Good-Bye

Times of good-bye are times to take stock of relationships. Among close family members and cherished friends, good-byes are emotional times when we look at the people from whom we are parting, and we remember what we have meant to each other.

Paul’s farewell to the Ephesian elders is set within the second “we” passage (20:5-15; 21:1-18; possibly 20:5—21:26). A “we” passage is one in which the author of Acts (Luke) is personally present.

Good-byes are times for remembrances. Paul reminisces about the time together. He recalls that no matter how difficult the Jews made the preaching of the gospel, he had left nothing

out of the message. He had given the Ephesian disciples the whole message, the complete gospel of Christ (vv.18-20, 26-27).

Good-byes are also times to consider and plan for the future. Paul is painfully aware of the danger before him. The Holy Spirit has warned him of the imprisonment and sufferings which lie ahead. Ultimately the dangers, even the possibility of death, do not matter to him as long as he feels that he is following the will of God in his life (v.24).

Paul also is aware of the dangers looming in the future for the Ephesian church. He reminds the Ephesians of the source of their strength and protection (20:32). Paul concludes with a final reminiscence and an admonition using familiar words of Jesus which are not included in the gospels (20:35). He dares to offer himself as an example to follow.

Is it true to say that the most important thing that we can give each other as family members and as Christian friends is the example of our lives? Particularly when we are separated, our most indelible memory is the way that the loved one acted, his or her example.

R&D How do I think that someone else might describe the example of my life to others?

Prayer: Help us to live as you would have us live, Lord Jesus, that our lives may be good examples to those who follow us.

Thursday, September 15

Read: Acts 21:1-40

Home at Last

Paul was determined to go home, back to the mother church. He had left Syrian Antioch on his third missionary journey (18:23—21:15) c. AD 52 and traveled some two to three thousand miles by foot and ship. He had been gone some four to six years and he wanted to go home.

What did Paul expect when he entered the city of Jerusalem? He had received warnings that the way would not be easy. The Holy Spirit had revealed that imprisonment and affliction awaited him (20:23). Through the Spirit, the disciples in Tyre had warned

Paul of danger in Jerusalem (v.4). The prophet Agabus came up to Caesarea from Jerusalem to warn Paul of imprisonment by the Gentiles (vv.10-11). Yet, in spite of all the warnings, Paul could not have anticipated how difficult things were to be in reality.

However, all started out well. Paul was warmly welcomed into the home of an early disciple, Mnason of Cyprus. He and his whole delegation were gladly received in Jerusalem by the Christians. James and the elders of the Jerusalem church met with him and glorified God because of his ministry. They reaffirmed their support of his work. Even the internal problem within the church between Paul and the many conservative Jewish Christians seemed to have a solution which might bring about reconciliation.

James and the elders asked Paul to make a grand and public gesture to refute the charges against him of ignoring the law and encouraging others to ignore the law (v.21). They asked him to join four men who had taken a Nazarite vow, purify himself along with them and pay their expenses. By so doing, he would show the many zealous Jewish Christians his own observance of the law (v.24). All of this Paul was willing to undertake. I. H. Marshall has said, "It is interesting to note that Paul's (subsequent) troubles were caused not by the strict Jewish Christians whom he was attempting to conciliate but by Jews from Asia who had come to Jerusalem as pilgrims at Pentecost." It is also ironic that Paul's deliverance appeared in the form and figures of imperial Roman law (vv.31-40).

R&D How far am I willing to go, what am I willing to do, to help resolve conflict between myself and others?

Prayer: Lord Christ, help us to be able to reach others for you across both actual and imagined dividing lines of thought and practice.

Friday, September 16

Read: Acts 22:1-30

What Kind of Witness?

Two things about Paul's speech gave him a hearing from the angry and violent crowd. He spoke to them in Aramaic which was the common speech of most Palestinian Jews. The second thing

which earned Paul a hearing was the manner in which he spoke. He made no reference to their attack upon him but he spoke to them as one of them and from his own experience.

Paul quickly tells of his early life. The focus of his speech is his testimony beginning with his conversion on the Damascus road. There are added details about Paul's experience which are not given previously by Luke (compare 9:3-9). The heart of Paul's speech is the commission which was given to him first through Ananias (vv.12-16) and later through a vision while he was praying in the temple in Jerusalem (vv.17-21).

At Paul's mention of the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's plan of salvation, the listening crowd once again became an unthinking, unheeding, destructive mob. To the Jews who felt that the Gentiles were accursed and had no right to God's love or to His word, Paul was a traitor and deserved death (vv.22-23).

For a second time, the tribune Lysias ordered Paul to safety. He was determined to find out the facts of Paul's case once and for all and so he ordered Paul to be tortured until he told the truth. Knowing what was intended and what it would do to him, at the very least incapacitate him so that he might never preach again, Paul used the only recourse open to him. He claimed the privilege of his Roman citizenship (v.25). Lysias had unwittingly broken two laws punishable by dismissal from his post and even death. To torture a Roman citizen was a crime; to administer punishment to a Roman citizen without trial was also a crime. It seemed to Lysias that the way out of his own dilemma was to settle this matter in the Jewish court where it seemed to belong.

R&D How would I witness before an antagonistic audience? What could I say that might influence them?

Prayer: You have promised to guide us through the Holy Spirit when we face situations we are unable to handle on our own. Please help us at such times, Lord Jesus.

Read: Acts 23:1-35

An Intractable Hatred

Paul's opening exchange with the high priest, Ananias, the officiating officer of the Sanhedrin (the supreme ruling body of the Jews), convinced him that he was unlikely to get justice from the Jewish court. He called to his own former party, the Pharisees on the court, for a hearing. Paul's appeal was like touching a match to gas-soaked logs as a quarrel immediately broke out within the Sanhedrin and became increasingly intense until violence erupted. For the third time Lysias was compelled to rescue Paul by the use of force (v.10).

Plots, intrigue, conspiracy, ambush, oaths, spies, courage, loyalty, counterplots, secret night maneuvers—all these are the elements of the next event. It sounds like an international spy novel but it is actually Luke and "Escape from Jerusalem." Luke is a master of the adventure narrative and that talent is again obvious. Events and people swirled around Paul as he became the pawn in a chess game between the Jews and Lysias.

With hatred burning, some forty Jews plotted to kill Paul. They sought and obtained the approval of the chief priests and elders for their plan. The plan became known to a previously unknown relative of Paul's, his sister's son. This nephew went to Paul in prison to warn him. Paul sent him to Lysias, who, on hearing of the plot of the Jews, immediately began his own counterplot. Using half of the men under his command to ensure Paul's safety, he sent Paul to Felix. Felix was the governor of Judea who resided in the Praetorium in Caesarea, the seat of the Roman government for the area. Roman law required that a subordinate officer, when appealing to a superior, provide a written statement of the case. Lysias did so, completely exonerating Paul. Willimon comments on the murder plot this way, "It is quite natural for the enemies of the gospel to try to stop its spread by killing those who bear the gospel. Paul's would-be assassins are dedicated, their oaths sealed by fasting. They will fail because Paul is God's chosen instrument (9:16)."

R&D *Hatred tells us that the ends justify the means. Do I ever use evil means to accomplish good purposes?*

Prayer: *We are grateful, Lord, for the protection of Your servant Paul, who, through his witness and letters, guides our way in following You.*

Sunday, September 18

Sabbath Time

I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. Psalm 69:2

And when a Christian identifies the problems to which he is speaking with his own experience, his listeners can hear and psychologically afford to admit that they experience the same difficulties. Then confession and healing can take place.

Monday, September 19

Read: Acts 24:1-27

The Acceptable Time

Felix, whom we meet in this next incident recorded in Acts, was born a slave. Through the influence of his brother, Pallas, a freed slave and a favorite of the Emperor Claudius (AD 41-54), he gained his freedom. He then did something no one had done before. Although born a slave, he became governor of a Roman province (Palestine AD 52-60). The Roman historian, Tacitus (c. AD 55-120), described Felix as lustful and cruel and commented that “he exercised royal power with the mind of a slave.”

As Paul stands before Felix, the charges against him assume political overtones. The lawyer for the Jews accuses Paul of being a political agitator and the ringleader of a sect, both charges subtly and dangerously suggesting rebellion. Only secondarily does the real charge of profaning the temple appear. Felix should have released Paul for he found nothing against him, but he detained him, hoping to receive money in exchange for Paul’s freedom. For two years, Felix held Paul and during this time “sent for him often and conversed with him” (v.26).

Once again, the Holy Spirit is clearly revealed as the main character of the book of Acts. We see the action of the Holy Spirit on Felix, piquing his interest, prodding him to meet with Paul, to talk, to discuss. Paul’s message was simple. It was a message of the

love of God, of the need for forgiveness of sins, and of the wonder of relationship with God through faith in Christ (vv.14-18). Paul must have shared this same message with Felix many times. Yet, Felix always answered, “Go away for the present” (v.25). Felix was not ready for the things which came from faith in Jesus Christ. He was never ready for justice and self-control, for the very things he needed the most. Felix was never ready, always tomorrow. “Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2).

R&D What are the circumstances of my life which have prepared/are preparing me to accept Jesus Christ in my life—now?

Prayer: Lord, the experiences of our lives are the training grounds for eternity with You.

Tuesday, September 20

Read: Acts 25:1-12

The Last Resort

Paul’s second jailer in Caesarea was Porcius Festus who succeeded Felix as governor of Palestine (AD 60-62). Festus was known as a more honest and just man than Felix, one who struggled valiantly to bring order and justice to the province. Immediately after assuming office, he went to Jerusalem to get acquainted with the Jews.

Now some two long years later, it might have been hoped that the Jews would have forgotten about Paul. However, not only did they remember him, but they also made him their first order of business with Festus (v.2). They saw the change of governors as an opportune time to get rid of Paul forever. With that ulterior motive in mind, they asked Festus to bring Paul to Jerusalem for trial.

Festus’ goal was peace and stability in his province, and he needed the cooperation of the Jews in order to assure those things. Fearing acquiescence to all the Jewish demands would be seen as a sign of weakness, however, he insisted that the Jews come to Caesarea. There he made his first order of business the confrontation between Paul and the Jews. Before Festus, once again the Jewish charges against Paul were ambiguous and without proof.

They centered on civil rebellion and ignored the theological dispute. So “Festus wanting to do the Jews a favor, said to Paul, ‘Do you wish to go up to Jerusalem, and there be tried on these charges before me?’” (v.9).

A public beating, arrest, imprisonment, trials before the Sanhedrin, before Felix and now before Festus wore on Paul’s spirit. He had always held fast to the promise of God that he would visit Rome. He was under no illusion about the kind of justice that he would receive from the Jews in Jerusalem. He was already caught in the tentacles of Roman law from which he was receiving little justice. As a Roman citizen, Paul had a last resort, and he took it now. He used the rights of his Roman citizenship to say, “I appeal to Caesar” (v.11). Only if Paul had been a murderer or a pirate or a robber caught in the act of robbery would his request have been invalid. The delivery of Festus’ judgment was according to formula as well: “You have appealed to Caesar; to Caesar you shall go” (v.12).

R&D How do I handle unjust situations where I am not at fault and other people continue to make difficulties for me?

Prayer: Too often it takes the darkest hour for us to do what we should have done in the first place...to turn to You, Lord.

Wednesday, September 21

Read: Acts 25:13-27

Where’s the Power? (1)

During the time while the arrangements were being made to transport Paul to Rome, Herod Agrippa II, who ruled parts of Palestine, came to Caesarea to pay a courtesy visit to Festus. Agrippa owed his position to the favor of the Roman emperor and he was very careful to pay his respects to such a high Roman official as Festus.

Festus found himself in a quandary. What was he to do with Paul? Required to send a valid charge to Rome with the prisoner, Festus had no such charge to make against Paul. He had little background in dealing with the Jews and their religion. As king of Palestine, Agrippa was the secular head of the Jewish church.

Perhaps he might be expected to know what was really happening. So Festus took advantage of Agrippa's visit to lay the case he had heard against Paul before him and to ask for his advice (vv.14-22).

The huge audience hall was prepared (v.23). Its great pillared sides were open to the air. Everyone of importance in the area was there—the prominent businessmen of the city, the military tribunes in full dress, and the ceremonial guard which surrounded Festus. The atmosphere was laden with power and money and influence.

Into this splendor, by command of Festus, Paul was brought (v.23). What a contrast in appearance he presented! Small, elderly, balding, graying beard, bowlegged, stooping, and yet somehow he appeared eager and vigorous and alert. Insignificant looking and wearing chains, everything about Paul's outward appearance proclaimed him to be powerless.

R&D As I look at the world, where do I see persons of power? How do I assign power to people?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for the inner power of Your Holy Spirit, unmatched by any power in the world.

Thursday, September 22

Read: Acts 26:1-23

Where's the Power? (2)

Attempting to establish a rapport with Agrippa, Paul opens his defense with words of deference which acknowledge Agrippa's background (vv.2-3). Paul's defense is autobiographical. He begins with his early life; and this time he stresses that what he believes as a Christian grows out of his Jewish beliefs as a Pharisee (vv.4-8). He recalls his bitter antagonism to the first Christians (vv.9-11). Again, he recounts his conversion experience (vv.12-18). He emphasizes that his commission, which has come to him personally from the risen Christ, is to bring forgiveness and salvation both to Jews and Gentiles (vv.22-23). As Paul speaks about his conversion and commissioning experience, he is more detailed than before (vv.10, 14, 17b-18).

Paul came to understand that in his attacks against individual Christians, he was wounding Christ himself. He had devoted himself to God and yet, in the name of God, he was bringing pain and suffering and even death to others.

Sometimes as we try to live a Christian life, when everything is going badly and when our chosen course of action seems to bring us little happiness or peace or joy, it is helpful to examine our choices and ask ourselves the following questions: Is what I am doing truly God's will for me? Is how I am feeling God's will for me? Is what I am thinking God's will for me? Is how I am dealing with those around me God's will for me?

If we answer "no" to any of those questions, we may be in the same position as Paul at the time of his conversion, that of fighting against the will of Christ for us, hurting others around us, ourselves and Jesus. It may be that we need to learn with Paul of the joy and peace of submission and to accept the offer of the yoke of salvation of Jesus Christ.

R&D *What feelings do I have when I hear the word "submission"?*

Prayer: *Heavenly Father, as I look at the story or my life—in the past and now—help me to see Your guiding hand because that's all that makes any difference.*

Friday, September 23

Read: Acts 26:24-32

Who Can Respond?

In the great audience hall, there were the men of worldly power—and there was Paul. At first glance, it seemed easy to see who was important and who would make a difference in the world, but that first glance would have been wrong. For the one who was insignificant to look at and powerless by the world's standards was the one filled with real power. Paul had taken the message Christ had given him to preach very much to heart and had applied it to himself. As he faced life, he was able to see reality and understand what was happening around him. He was full of power to move out for God. He was able to accept himself and to love himself because he was sure of God's forgiveness. He was willing to risk

anything and everything because he was assured of a place with the Lord. No one remembers Festus or Agrippa but Bible students. Everyone remembers Paul. Where was the real power?

When Paul finished speaking, or perhaps even before he was done, those in authority responded to him, each in his or her own way. Festus was unable to understand (v.24). Paul's language was unintelligible to him. He saw Paul's words as the ravings of a demented man (v.25). Agrippa reacted as the sophisticated often do. If touched in any way, he quickly shrugged off those feelings with a jest, half-humorously (v.28). He took it lightly, making fun of the offer of Christ and he quickly moved away from it. Bernice was the invisible woman, who heard nothing and lived her future life as though Christ had never existed.

While they are all gone, Paul's words remain real and true, heard still by millions of people worldwide. His message from Christ was not just for those ancient people in that ancient place in that ancient time. His witness is as strong today as it was in that great first century arena. Paul said, "Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am, except for these chains" (v.29).

R&D What does it mean to me to hear Paul's words in verse 29? What is there that Paul possessed that I need to have in my life?

Prayer: The deepest treasure in our hearts, Lord Jesus, is our love for you.

Saturday, September 24

Read: Acts 27:1-44

In the Storm: God

From the beginning, one of God's promises and purposes for Paul has been clear. The gospel must be preached in Rome and Paul is to preach it (23:11). It is Festus whose words now order Paul to be taken to Rome but it is God who sends him. It is God who guarantees that arrival, no matter what obstacles must be surmounted.

The obstacles are many and great! To sail the seas in the time of storms is to encounter storms. The ship encounters great

waves, mighty winds, dangerous waters, and constantly overcast skies blocking vision and thereby leaving no guide to navigation. It will all end in shipwreck.

Throughout this adventure Paul rubs shoulders with all sorts and conditions of men. Dangers always arise when men are greedy or frightened or in trouble. Seeking only profit, the owners send the ship out at the wrong time of year. Desiring only to save their own lives even at the expense of others, the sailors try secretly to abandon the ship and its passengers. Concerned only about their own livelihood and lives, the soldiers plot to kill their prisoners rather than take the risk that they might escape. Paul encounters each of these dangers on this voyage. Yet, throughout, it is the Lord who sends the insight, the strength, the encouragement, and the necessary good will to enable escape.

Few of us escape storms in our lives. Sometimes they are caused by our own foolishness. Sometimes our storms are caused by circumstances beyond our control and we encounter danger through no fault of our own. Like Paul, sometimes we are carried along by the current of events and the needs and emotions of other people.

In the final analysis, it doesn't matter how the storms come or whose fault they are. What matters is how we deal with them. In dealing with "all sorts and conditions," it is God who makes the difference. We serve a Lord who makes a difference in circumstances and in us, and who enables us to live through the storms of life.

R&D How does God make a difference in my life when I encounter the difficulties and dangers of life?

Prayer: Great obstacles for us are no obstacles at all for You, Lord God. Help us to keep our focus on You even in the midst of calamity.

Sunday, September 25

Sabbath Time

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Matthew 4:17

Christian repentance is not a mere verbal expression or being "sorry about" certain acts. It is more like an agonizing wrench-

ing as we turn our backs on our own past. It's as if we were pulling our lives up by the roots and replanting them, facing in a different direction. This act of the will constitutes a deep denial of our past direction and becomes a first step toward responding to the God we have sensed was pursuing us.

Monday, September 26

Read: Acts 27:1-44

In the Storm: Paul

One purpose Luke had in describing Paul's journey to Rome in such detail is to look closely once again at Paul. As event succeeds event, gradually Paul emerges as the central figure. In many ways, these events reveal the character of Paul more clearly than anything we have seen of him thus far.

If it is true that it is in an emergency that the real person is seen, we see Paul with the qualities of a true leader: practical, patient, insightful, able to work with and direct others, a person of supreme confidence.

Paul displays an unexpected side to his personality throughout these events. He emerges as an eminently practical person, and along with the practicality is a heretofore unseen patience. Throughout the critical periods and the emergencies which occur, Paul remains calm, cool, and collected, a counselor of sanity (vv.10, 31, 33-34).

Throughout the voyage and shipwreck, it is the confidence of Paul that is most impressive. He is supremely confident that they will weather the storm and make it to Rome. However, as Luke clearly shows, Paul's confidence is not based on outward circumstances or in his own ability to meet any eventuality but in the promise of God to him. "I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told" (vv.22-25).

Supreme confidence in self is misplaced. There are some things that we can do very well. There are things that we can make happen. But there are always events and circumstances beyond our control. Supreme confidence in God, however, is the foundation for the ability to deal courageously with anything life lays before us.

R&D *When I am under stress what qualities do I display? How do I deal with circumstances beyond my control?*

Prayer: *Your plan is always the better plan, Lord; help us to stay within that plan rather than trying to tackle things on our own.*

Tuesday, September 27

Read: Acts 28:1-10

The Storm: Epilogue

Wet, numbed with cold, bruised and battered from the rocks which had broken the ship, exhausted from days of fear, the 276 persons from the ship swam or floated on broken bits of the ship and at last struggled ashore. Malta, a Phoenician word meaning escape, was appropriately named indeed! The island natives turned out to be a kindly and hospitable people who immediately built a fire to warm and dry their unexpected guests. As Luke's extended and exciting description of the storm and shipwreck draws to its conclusion, the same themes continue. God's divine favor and protection are again revealed as Paul is bitten by a viper and suffers no ill effects. The kindness and warmth of the hospitable people of Malta provide for his needs and those of the entire ship's company as they wait for the seas to open for navigation once more.

The personality of Paul continues to be revealed as practical and helpful. Seeking no special privileges for himself, he turns to needed manual labor, gathering wood along with the others. As the recipient of help and hospitality, it is with thankful heart that Paul shares what he has when need arises. Paul offers the gifts of healing with which he is blessed by the Holy Spirit to others, the father of Publius and the rest of the people of the island who had diseases. An interesting note is seen in that the word for healed (v.9) means to receive medical attention. It is possible that the physician, Luke, is with Paul and is also busy caring for the various ills of the Maltese people.

R&D *How do I try to reciprocate when other people have done kind and beneficial things for me?*

Prayer: *We are to serve as you served, Lord Christ, for the benefit of others in need.*

Wednesday, September 28

Read: Acts 28:11-16

Reception in Rome (1)

When the ship carrying Paul and his friends from Malta docked at Puteoli, they received warm hospitality from the Christians there. As Paul neared Rome, the Christians came out to meet him. The Greek word Luke uses suggests that they welcomed him like a conquering hero. The Roman Christians had walked thirty and forty miles just to be able to see Paul and escort him back to Rome. Paul had been beaten, stoned, rejected, maligned, and imprisoned. Finally, he was honored!

At long last, Paul was able to visit the church in Rome and they honored him with a wonderful welcome. After such uncertain welcomes in so many places, Paul may have been unsure of their feelings for him. But “On seeing them, Paul thanked God and took courage” (v.15). What reassurance! What encouragement!

Why was this welcome so important to him? Paul cared little for the hero’s welcome. It was the evidence of the love and acceptance of the Christian community which he sought. It meant that he was not alone. No matter how intelligent we are, no matter how independent, no matter how well-integrated our personality, we need other people.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew what it was to need other Christians. Alone, in prison, he wrote, “Therefore, let him who now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God’s grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.”

R&D What benefits do I derive from the Christian community in which I am involved? Why is community important to me?

Prayer: *Dear Lord, the communities of faith within which we worship You are truly our brothers and sisters in Christ for whom we give You thanks and praise.*

Thursday, September 29

Read: Acts 28:17-29

Reception in Rome (2)

“Bloom where you are planted” is one of the slogans sometimes used in renewal programs in the church. It means to work in God’s kingdom just where you are to do whatever work the Lord puts in front of you. Here Paul exemplifies this profound truth.

Under house arrest in Rome, Paul had his own quarters. As soon as he possibly could, he invited the leaders from the Jewish community to come and visit him (v.17). To their credit, they came. At the first meeting with the Jewish leaders, he presented his own personal case before them (vv.17-20). Another meeting was planned, and a large number of persons came. Paul took full advantage of his opportunity to meet with many of his own people and to share the gospel. Intensely and eagerly, he opened the Old Testament scriptures to them in a way that they had never heard before. Untiringly, with impressive fervor and faith, he pointed to Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfillment of all of God’s promises to their nation.

Some people, moved by the Spirit, believed. Many more resisted and rejected his words. As Paul quoted the prophet Isaiah about the difficulty of faith, they began to leave. It was a turning point for Paul. For more than thirty years he had preached to his own people first. Again, and now more firmly, he came to the conclusion that the rejection of Jesus by the Jews opened the door of salvation to the Gentiles (vv.23-28; Romans 9-11).

Paul was not idle in prison, but his ministry was different. Not at liberty to travel, he preached to those who came to him, many from within the household of Caesar. And he broadened his work for Christ into another area. He wrote letters to Philippians, Colossians, Ephesians and either the whole or fragments of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. Blooming where he was planted, he still engaged in fruitful ministry.

R&D *How willing am I to do the work God places before me? Am I tempted to seek greater or lesser areas of service?*

Prayer: *Loving Lord, help me to bloom where I am planted.*

Friday, September 30

Read: Acts 28:30-31

An Open-Ended Story

Some years ago, a Sunday school curriculum used a teaching technique involving open-ended stories. A situation was recounted describing characters and detailing facts but the story was left unresolved. The children were free to decide the outcome of the story themselves and, hopefully, to use some Christian principles in determining the outcome.

In a very real way, Luke has left the book of Acts as an open-ended story. Acts doesn't really end. We know that there is more to the story. You and I are like the children who determine plot. We make the decision about how the story continues in our time.

With keen insight, Will Willimon writes, "You and I live in the continuation of the story of Acts. Acts must close in an open-ended fashion with the door still open for work and witness rather than closed by death, because the Spirit is still active. Luke is not simply writing history. He writes the story of the Spirit, the Spirit incarnate in people like you and me." And that Spirit never dies.

The book of Acts presents us with the challenge to carry on the work of witnessing in our own Jerusalems, Judeas, Samarias, and to the ends of our world (1:8). It gives us encouragement to be evangelists ourselves. It can provide impetus for a new awareness of the Spirit within us.

As a believer in Jesus Christ, I know that the Holy Spirit is an integral part of my life. He is involved in each and every event of my life. As I think about how he worked in the early church, I know that he can and will work the same way in my life. If I will face each event and opportunity and crisis in my life with the knowledge that he is present, if I will invest every relationship with

the knowledge that he is present, then I will live my future life even more powerfully and creatively. Knowing that he is present, enabling me, will also increase my desire to share him with others.

So I invite you, as I remind myself, to be continually open to the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life. Depend upon him for strength and power, for patience and peace, for enablement in all areas of your life and for participation in all relationships. Depend upon him, also, to bring a continual remembering of Jesus Christ to your heart and mind with such vigor and force that you will feel you must share him with others.

R&D How do I witness to the reality of Jesus Christ in my life?

Prayer: Here am I, Lord, open to the Holy Spirit, to take me to the next chapter of Acts in my life.



Life with God in the Psalms

Saturday, October 1

Read: 2 Samuel 23:1-5

Introduction

Although from our reading today we honor David, the author of many of the psalms, the Psalter is a collection of 150 religious songs and hymns written by several, perhaps even many, unknown authors over a period of many centuries. All human experiences and emotions from exultant joy to depths of despair, from chaos to tranquility, from love to hate are expressed in the psalms, making them universal and relevant to men and women of all times. Like the Hebrew people, Christians have incorporated this treasure-trove of prayer into their worship, particularly in churches with strong liturgical tradition.

It is clear that the psalms were already familiar in the earliest days of Christianity since Jesus made frequent reference to them and Paul quoted from them in his letters to the early church.

Perhaps the best description of the psalms is the one given by John Calvin in his *Commentary on the Psalms*: “I may truly call this book an anatomy of all parts of the soul, for no one can feel a movement of the Spirit which is not reflected in this mirror. All the sorrows, troubles, fears, doubts, hopes, pains, perplexities, stormy outbreaks by which the hearts of men are tossed, have been depicted here to the very life.”

R&D *What is your favorite psalm, and why?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, for this treasury of deep, personal human feelings, with which we may all identify in one way or another.*

But immediately he spoke to them, saying, "Take heart, it is I; have no fear." Matthew 14:27

People have paid thousands of dollars over the centuries to watch trapeze artists, not because it is difficult to hang from a bar. They pay for the one second when the performer lets go and reaches for the next bar. Will he fall? And I believe that's our question in the church! I think many of us want to surrender our flimsy securities and reach ahead for a deeper and more personal involvement with God and his people—with life. But we are afraid that if we tum loose, we will fall into an unknown condition and lose what we have—and we cannot chance it.

Monday, October 3

Read: Psalm 1**Total Security**

This psalm has qualities characteristic of an introduction or prologue to the entire Psalter. In some Hebrew versions it is unnumbered, suggesting that it might originally have been a prologue to the Psalter. In others, it is combined with Psalm 2.

In any event, the psalmist uses a device well known in the advertising profession. Opening with a catchy phrase, "Blessed is the man who," he seizes our attention and makes us eager to hear more. Continuing, he makes it clear that blessedness consists not merely of feeling good or of finding God, but, rather, of being known by Him. True happiness, in his opinion, lies in refusing to follow in the footsteps of those who disregard or even deride God. Such men are like chaff which is blown this way and that by any chance wind that comes along.

The righteous, on the other hand, are "known" by God who not only takes cognizance of them but, even more importantly, takes an intense interest in them. To be known by God is to do away with any barriers that might stand between oneself and God. This person is beloved of God because he does not allow any obstruction in the path of God's love for him. This psalm which opens with a statement of what man wants and ends with an affirmation of what God wants for all His children is said to have been

a favorite of Jerome, ancient Bible scholar and saint. The underlying central certainty, a fervent trust in God's righteous control of the universe, is unequivocal security.

R&D How can we live in such a way that nothing is allowed to come between us and God?

Prayer: I thank You, Lord, for those I have known who exemplify "the man who" in this psalm.

Tuesday, October 4

Read: Psalm 7

What God Expects of Us

God's righteousness is extolled in this psalm. It was inconceivable to the author that God could be capable of injustice. Righteousness to him was more than an ideal that might exist somewhere outside the real world. It was a concrete, specific, operative factor in the here and now. Throughout the psalms we find God performing just and righteous works and we believe that this is what He requires of us who are bound to Him by covenant. The standard He sets is integrity of behavior and intention, and He expects His people to live up to that standard.

But how can we reconcile what we see in the world today? The pain of conflict, the suffering of hunger and homelessness, the problem of good versus evil? If sin is understood as transgression against God in thought or deed, then His forgiveness must be sought by all, for we have all fallen short of the standard set for us. Our Lord himself sternly rebuked one who addressed him as "good." "Why do you call me good?" he asked (Mark 10:18). "No one is good but God alone."

For mortal man to assume his own righteousness is to set himself upon an unreal pedestal. None of us can, of ourselves, attain righteousness. Our concern must be that each decision made and every action performed be in accord with God's will, as we understand it. Then, having done all that lies within our power, we must leave the rest to God.

R&D *Reflect on some occasion when you have given yourself a pat on the back figuratively for “being good.” Looking back, how do you feel about it now?*

Prayer: *Lord God, our humility can be measured by our recognition of how close we come to Your expectations of us.*

Wednesday, October 5

Read: Psalm 8

The Dignity of Man

The theme of this psalm, one of the most beautiful in the Psalter, is awe and wonder at the extraordinary glory and majesty of the creator of the universe. Contrasted with that is the triviality, the insignificance of man. And yet, incredibly, God has made man little less than Himself and has given him dominion over His creation, the birds and beasts, creatures of the sea!

How unbelievable! But how like God to take the small, the inconsequential, of the mortal world and make of it something of consequence and worth! Inadequate as we are, we are impelled to offer Him praise, the best we have to give. Man's dominion over creation is not something he has earned or achieved but, rather, a gift. Besides, it is a dominion that requires wisdom in using. Man can discover and harness powers to benefit society or to destroy it. Man must use these wonders of creation as God would have them used. We are not the sovereigns of creation but viceroys of the Lord. Again, how incredible that God should entrust His creation to man!

This psalm was among the favorites of John Ruskin who called the Psalter “a complete guide to all human life, in which is encapsulated the wisdom of society and the individual.”

R&D *In what ways do you exercise good stewardship over God's creation?*

Prayer: *Lord, thank You for what You have given us; make us every mindful of our need to care for what we have.*

Read: Psalm 15

Decalogue of Piety

This is a fine summary of Old Testament piety somewhat in the form of a decalogue. It vividly sets forth the qualities of character and conduct required of the diligent person for acceptance with God. These strongly ethical directives are representative of Israel's religion. Obedience to God and integrity in dealings with others are necessary and basic. Other qualifications also called for are sincerity of speech and avoidance of malicious or thoughtless gossip that hurts our neighbor; keeping one's word even when doing so is not to his best interests or works to his disadvantage; shunning the practice of usury in dealing with fellow Israelites, although charging interest was permitted in dealing with foreigners; refusal to accept bribery against the innocent.

The dictum we may have greatest difficulty in accepting is verse 4, "in whose eyes a reprobate is despised." This seems to be condemnation of the sinner, but the point is probably that the truly virtuous person judges others by moral and religious standards irrespective of conditions such as power and wealth by which they are frequently judged in our world today.

The psalm ends with an assertion of unshakable security for the faithful worshipper of God.

R&D In view of the dictum regarding avoidance of gossip, how would most of us fare in seeking acceptance with God?

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to be more accepting of others by being more conscious of our own shortcomings.

Friday, October 7

Read: Psalm 16

Virtue and Reward

This is the confident prayer of one who finds in life with God the supreme satisfaction of existence. Communion with God is the surest help in times of adversity and affliction. The writer looks forward to the future with glad confidence, trusting in God as benefactor, guide and helper who will deliver him from present

hardships and misfortunes, enabling him to live to a ripe old age. Possibly this could be taken to mean that when he dies, he will not go to Sheol but instead live a good life with Yahweh.

This is considered the most advanced spiritually of all the psalms since it suggests the hope of immortality (v.10) and is quoted in Acts 13:35 as a prophecy of the resurrection of Christ. Although the words used do not necessarily denote what is read into it in the New Testament, it is true that it does suggest the hope of immortality.

In any event, communion with God and life in Him is the supreme good and greatly to be desired. God gives us not only bounteous provision and happiness in this life but hope of the same in the future as well.

R&D What difference would it make to you if you had no reason to believe there is life after death?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we thank you and praise you that you died that we may live in you now and in the eternity ahead.

Saturday, October 8

Read: Psalm 19

My Strength and My Redeemer

It is generally believed that two psalms may have been merged here. The opening verses (1-6) celebrating the manifestation of God's power in nature are thought to be taken from a Babylonian hymn to the sun god Shamash, subsequently adapted for Jewish use. The following verses (7-11) clearly extol the law in tone reminiscent of Psalm 119. The law is seen here not as a burden but rather as a means of entering more fully into the will of Yahweh.

One might wonder why two such diverse poems of presumably different origins have been combined into one, but the testimony of nature to the majesty of God and the testimony of the law to His will are not incompatible. Despite similarities between this psalm and the Babylonian concept of the sun god Shamash crossing the sky and entering a tent in the sea where his bride dwelt, it must be kept in mind that this is not a hymn to a sun god but to

Israel's creator-God and the sun is not a deity but one of the works of Almighty God.

The psalmist's prayer for preservation from sin (vv.12-13) contains the interesting thought that "presumptuous" sins are transgressions for which the law provided no atonement. Therefore, they are the deadliest of all sins.

The psalm closes with a beautiful brief prayer familiar to us all.

R&D Is the concept of a sin for which there is no atonement compatible with the Christian belief of forgiveness for the penitent? Explain.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, the rules You give us to live by are not to bind us in submission but to free us to live as You would have us live.

Sunday, October 9

Sabbath Time

Then Moses answered, "But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice...." Then the Lord said to him, "Who has made man's mouth?" Exodus 4:1, 11

An essential trait for an agent of change would seem to be courage, raw courage. And that has been the stumbling block for me and for a good many of the people I've talked to about these things: the fear of risking our jobs, reputations, vocational future, etc. And yet I think God actually is going to use those of us who are afraid, who aren't very stable in our courageousness, who sometimes run like crazy from doing his will, and are afraid to turn loose of our securities! —just as he used men like Moses and Gideon in spite of their anxious attempts to avoid God's call to courageous action.

Monday, October 10

Read: Psalm 25

Guidance and Forgiveness

This is one of the acrostic psalms, consisting mainly of self-contained reflections, though here and there the reader detects a linking of thought sequences. Although holding to the alphabetical form of the acrostic results in a somewhat artificial style, the prayers and maxims here expressed are beautiful and worthy of

serious examination. The psalm abounds in spiritual guidance and stresses the need for following the leading of the Lord in keeping His covenant. Then, acknowledging that his own guilt is great, the writer goes on to beg for the Lord's forgiveness.

That there is discord in the religious party is evident in two allusions to conflict (vv.2-3 and 19-22) and there is also reference to personal affliction in these verses. The most striking element in this psalm is the unshakable trust of the writer in the faithfulness, the compassionate goodness, and the loving kindness of God, not based on what the writer deserves but on the sheer goodness of the Almighty.

Even if this psalm were limited to the writer's personal religious convictions, it would still be of incalculable universal value for it holds much of which we should take note and incorporate into our own lives.

R&D In our relationship with our children, do we follow the Lord's example in exercising loving-kindness beyond what the child might deserve at that moment?

Prayer: Lord God, You lay a clear pathway of life before each of us; guide us, through Your Holy Spirit, each step of the way.

Tuesday, October 11

Read: Psalm 32

Repentance and Forgiveness

Time and again we see in the healing ministry the ravaging consequences of guilt, resentment, hatred, and other such emotions and attitudes. So closely interwoven are the mental, physical, and emotional spheres of our being that anything gone amiss in one of these has a detrimental effect on the others. Clearly, the psalmist has experienced the agony of unconfessed sin and its damaging effect upon his physical health. In relating his own misery before confession and the exhilarating release that followed, he fervently commends the practice of prayer and declares his own confidence in God.

In the closing verses (8-11), it is God speaking words of encouragement and direction, exhorting the psalmist to come of his

own free will and make amends for his sins. The release following confession and repentance effects a genuine restoration of body, mind and spirit.

R&D Reflect upon a specific occasion when you have suffered the torment of unconfessed guilt or wrongdoing. Did you repent and, if so, what was the result?

Prayer: Lord, may we keep short accounts with You so that we won't continue to carry the weight of guilt with us.

Wednesday, October 12

Read: Psalm 39

Compelled to Pray

It is not easy to pigeonhole this psalm, for while it contains elements of lament and confession, it also affirms the fact that the experience of affliction has turned the writer to God in appeal for deliverance and has led him to reflect upon the transience of human life. In its reflective quality it bears strong resemblance to Psalm 73 while in subject matter it recalls Psalm 90. Although no expectation of life after death is hinted at, it goes beyond merely a negative assessment of life and becomes a prayer to God with trust and hope unexpressed but implicit.

Aware that his life may be coming to an end shortly, the psalmist appeals to God for an understanding of it all. He prays for deliverance from his sins and for forgiveness of their consequences. It is his belief that since it is God who has reproved him, it is therefore God alone to whom he can look for help. He sees his life as that of a pilgrim in an alien land, totally dependent upon the beneficence of the sovereign. The psalm closes with a supplication that God remove His disfavor before it is too late.

The word *Selah* found here and in 39 other psalms is one of the greatest puzzles of the Old Testament. Its meaning is obscure but since it occurs usually at the end of a thought, it is possible that it is an instruction to those chanting the psalm but what that instruction might be is unknown.

R&D Think of some time when you felt so completely helpless and hopeless that you were compelled to pray.

Prayer: *Help us to remember, Dear Lord, that prayer should be our first thought in times of trouble, not our last one.*

Thursday, October 13

Read: Psalm 42

Have You Forsaken Me?

All of us at some point or other have felt abandoned and forsaken by God. Everything has gone wrong; there seems to be no ray of light breaking through the heavy gloom; the sky has fallen in on us. Where is God? Has He really deserted us? Does He no longer care?

The author of this psalm, suffering mental and perhaps even physical agony, ponders this question. He longs to experience again the closeness he once had with God. He remembers the exhilaration of participating in the great festivals at the temple when temple worship was at its zenith. It is a different story now. He is beset by enemies, apparently heathen, who taunt him about his God. He longs to return and once again know the joy and solace of the spiritual life he once knew.

Thomas H. Green, S.J., deals with this plight in *When the Well Runs Dry*. We read that it is not that God is absent. In fact, He is closer than He has ever been, but we are blind. This “dark night of the soul,” as St. John of the Cross calls it, is really God’s love working its purification in us. Father Green writes, “When the dawn suddenly breaks upon the heart that has been desiring it with its whole being, the whole long night which has passed will seem a small enough price to pay for the wondrous joy of the new day.”

R&D *Describe an experience you have had of a “dark night of the soul.”*

Prayer: *Gracious God, You are always with us; Your Holy Spirit dwells within us. It may be an over-simplification, but the old saying is true: “If you believe God is not with you, guess who moved?”*

Read: Psalm 43

Holy Places

So closely connected are this psalm and the preceding one that it is assumed they were originally one. This psalmist, a Levite far from home, grieves over his lack of access to the sanctuary which once meant so much to him.

People have gone “to the altar of God” from time immemorial, for having sacred time and space are inherent elements of both Judaism and Christianity. Man has always sought a place to have a personal relationship with God, a place where the world can be shut out and one can become immersed in prayer and spiritual reflection without distraction.

Yes, God is everywhere and universal and cannot be confined but it seems a requisite of our finite nature to localize Him. We instinctively yearn for a symbol of the sacred in the midst of our secular life, a balance between a universal God and a personal one. However, we must be constantly on guard to maintain this balance and not fall into the trap of believing that God is to be found only in the holy places and nowhere else.

R&D Where have you been that was, for you, a holy place?

Prayer: Help us to balance our corporate and our personal worship of You, Lord God, that we may be truly blessed by each.

Saturday, October 15

Read: Psalm 51

The Acceptable Sacrifice

This psalm, attributed to King David, might have been written after David’s adultery with Bathsheba. In verses 1-4 the writer recognizes his sin and grieves over it, just as we grieve over the remembrance of our sins. As our mind beholds the image of God’s immeasurable love and the goal for which He created us, our failure to reach that goal through our own misdoings is cause for anguish. Here, in one of the seven penitential psalms, this is strikingly expressed.

In the opening verses we find the confession that reflects man's inherent tendency to rebel against God. A prayer for forgiveness and renewal follows.

A vow and the intention to amend one's life brings the psalm to an end. Verse 17 contains a profound insight which is the climax of this prayer.

The potential for sin is ever-present and is not some remote incident in the past but, rather, a continual experience. As Dewi Morgan writes in *Arising from the Psalms*, "The Adam who fell is Everyman who is falling. And the Eden-Garden of God's love is a place from which we are constantly being thrust because we, by our voluntarily performed acts, reject its delights in favor of some husks meant for swine."

Our life is the never-ending struggle between what we are and what God created us to be and only through God's merciful acceptance of our penitence and repentance can we be saved.

R&D *What do you understand the quotation from Dewi Morgan to mean in our life today?*

Prayer: *May David's psalm be a reminder to us that, regardless of the depth of our sin, we can still experience the remarkable truth that God will forgive us if we truly repent.*

Sunday, October 16

Sabbath Time

"These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be with you, and that your joy may be full." John 15:11

If and when your friendship with someone grows (and it so often will if you love him), and he acknowledges sometime that his life is not complete, then very naturally and simply you may want to tell him how you came to a realization in your own life that it wasn't what it should be and how that realization caused you to turn to God. Tell your friend what God did, not to make you good (Christ was pretty clear about his attitude toward men claiming goodness; see Mark 10:18), but to make you basically more joyful. And if you are not basically more joyful regardless of the many problems you have as a Christian, then you had better

take a close look at your relationship with Christ. You may have missed something very important in the Gospel yourself.

Monday, October 17

Read: Psalm 67

All Blessings Flow

The outpouring of the spirit to God is evident throughout the psalms. It is to God that the psalmist sings in joy and thanksgiving; to God that he cries for help and deliverance. Whatever the spiritual state of the reader, he finds in the psalms something that speaks to his present situation.

This short and joyful psalm starts with an outburst of praise and thanksgiving, perhaps in response to a bounteous harvest. Praise has the odd quality of not only changing the one who praises but also of changing the object of the praise, for in the act of being praised the object undergoes redemption. That is, meaning depends upon relationship. This should be easy for the Christian to understand because when the homely elements of bread and wine are brought into relationship with Christ in Holy Communion, they are spiritually changed into the Body and Blood of the Savior. God, in redeeming man, changes man from a burdened, earth-bound creature to a true child of His, inheritor of the kingdom, and brother to Christ himself.

No political or social activism message is promulgated here. This psalm conveys nothing but sheer joy in a mood that is contagious, filling the reader, too, with joy,

R&D What effect does such an exultant psalm have on you? Can such songs of hope help the depressed and lonely?

Prayer: Thank You, Heavenly Father, that the Christian life is a joy-filled life.

Tuesday, October 18

Read: Psalm 73

Lasting Happiness

The psalmist's mind is engaged by the timeless and unending problem that has perplexed man from time immemorial:

the prospering of the wicked and the sufferings of the righteous. Although we acknowledge the fact that God sees the secret vices, it is difficult for us to follow the way we know is right when it appears to be unrewarding. All around us we see the unscrupulous gaining fame and fortune—untouched by pain, suffering, hardship—seemingly to glide through life on a smooth path. By contrast, we experience some of the rough spots and cannot help but question, “Where is justice? Why should the cheating, dishonest ones get ahead in the world when I try my best and still run unto all sorts of troubles?”

This is an ageless perplexity and one for which we have no irrefutable answer except to follow the lead of the psalmist and figuratively enter into the sanctuary of God, as he did. There it became clear to him that the only true and lasting blessedness is to be found in fellowship with God, regardless of the material surroundings. Such an ever-deepening relationship ensures guidance in the precarious present and promise of life in His nearer presence tomorrow.

R&D How have you found peace when faced with the baffling fact of some people “having all the luck” and others not having any?

Prayer: Walking the path you have for us, Lord, is always better than walking the path of the world.

Wednesday, October 19

Read: Psalm 88

Sadness and Despair

In this, the saddest and most despairing of the psalms, the writer is in grim straits. He apparently is the victim of some dread disease which has rendered him repugnant to his fellowmen, an outcast of society. He is completely void of hope since life for him is already a living hell and he can see nothing beyond it. He attributes all his affliction to God’s displeasure with him, a punishment for whatever he has done wrong. And yet it is God to whom he turns in his pathetic appeal for help!

How quick we are to regard suffering of any kind in ourselves or others as God’s punishment for sin or offense! Yet we

know in our heart of hearts that He is the ultimate loving Father. His will for us is complete wholeness of body, mind, and spirit. This is what He wants for us. After all, if we, imperfect parents that we are, want only the best for our children and would never knowingly inflict suffering or hardship upon them, how can we expect anything less than that of God for His children? But while He does not send these afflictions, He permits them to happen. Often, they result from our poor judgments, unwise decisions, irresponsible actions, or misuse of that great gift of free will. However, our heavenly Father is quick to forgive and to heal when we come to Him in penitence.

R&D Reflect on some occasion when you, through rash decision or action, have brought trouble upon yourself. What did you do to make amends?

Prayer: In times of dire need, help us to reflect, Dear Lord, on Your love as we look for signs of hope in the midst of our pain.

Thursday, October 20

Read: Psalm 90

Time and Space

With an over-full agenda and one eye on the clock, how quick we are to think of time as a demanding adversary against which we must ever be on guard, not daring to risk the luxury of an unguarded moment! It seems that the writer of this psalm and others of his day had a healthier concept of time. For them, artificial measurement into minutes, hours, days was unimportant. Unnamed months were known by what happened during them—the time to plant seeds, the season of rain, the ripening of the harvest. The writer of Ecclesiastes said, “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven; a time to be born, a time to die...” (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2). The true significance of time lies in what takes place in it, the actual experience, not the hours, days, or months label which man invented.

In this psalm, one of the best known and regarded as both prayer and hymn, are contrasted the eternity of God and the impermanence of man’s existence. From this perspective, time can be

recognized as God's gift to man to make of it what he will, to put to worthwhile use or to squander or to misuse.

Even in face of life and death, the writer refuses to loosen his hold on faith. God is His everlasting rock and ultimate abode.

R&D Reflect on some "quiet day" you have attended. How did the experience of seemingly unlimited time in prayer and meditation serve to replenish your inner resources?

Prayer: May we keep in perspective, Lord, that this brief sojourn on earth is just a tiny tip of the eternity You have in mind for us.

Friday, October 21

Read: Psalm 91

Under Protection

The tenor of this psalm is found early in the beautiful words of perfect assurance voiced throughout. Total confidence and trust run through the verses like a golden thread, casting off any dark strands of doubt and fear that might creep in.

In our present time when the absolutes of former days are questioned and challenged, it is strikingly encouraging and heartening to become imbued with such irrefutable confidence as is here expressed. Herein the psalmist finds the promise of protection against every sort of danger surrounding him—harmful afflictions, unseen dangers, everyday hazards, havoc, and devastation that invade our common life. In the final verses (14-16), it is the voice of God reassuring us that steadfast trust in Him is ultimately honored, perhaps not resulting in exactly what we would choose but always according to His will and purpose. This is a promise to cling to and we do well to carry it in our hearts continually.

R&D When specifically, in time of distress, have you remembered this psalm and called upon it? Did it speak to you at that time?

Prayer: What a blessing, Lord, that we can call upon the reassuring words of this ancient psalm in any present problem we face.

Read: Psalm 100

Be Joyful in the Lord

Just as the Hebrew people have done down through the ages, Christians, too, have incorporated psalms into their worship, particularly in those churches which have a strong liturgical tradition. The psalms hold a wealth of inspiration for prayer, both corporate and private.

This familiar psalm, well known as the Jubilate, is a joyous call to worship. While it does not overtly refer to God as king, in content it is remarkably similar to several of the “theocratic” psalms, and it ascribes to Him all the attributes of the sovereign. He is the creator and ruler: “It is he that hath made us and not we ourselves;” He is the Shepherd: “We are his people and the sheep of his hand.”

Contained in this brief psalm are two liturgical invitations. All the world is summoned to praise God in His temple and to serve Him as we enter into His presence with joyful hearts. Verse 4 repeats this invitation, calling us into even closer company with Him within the temple gates and courts, and the psalm closes with the familiar phrase, “His steadfast love endures forever.”

R&D *In what way do you serve the Lord with gladness?*

Prayer: *Praise to You, Lord God, for Your gracious goodness and ever-present love for each of Your children.*

Sunday, October 23

Sabbath Time

“For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Matthew 11:30

We often stayed out late on Saturday nights, going to dinners, movies, dances—mostly involving some preparatory social drinking, some sustaining social drinking and/or some “one for the road” social drinking. But as I began to go home and try to put the finishing touches on my Sunday School lesson at 2:30 a.m. some Sunday mornings, I realized that just as a practical matter if nothing else, some changes were in order. So we started coming in earlier. When we began to reserve Sunday as a family day with the children, we found that we felt terrible physically after a late

evening with too much to eat and drink. I began to want to live a life with more order and moderation in it, and the subsequent changes in our social life opened a whole new world of personal relationships and family activities I had never before “had time for.”

Monday, October 24

Read: Psalm 103

Bless the Lord

This beautiful psalm has universal appeal with its reverberation of an Easter kind of joy in God’s unfathomable love and faithfulness. Probably written shortly after the return from exile, it is an outpouring of the psalmist’s personal gratitude and praise. It sings of unbounded thanksgiving to a Father who loves His children immeasurably, deeply enough to discipline them, but always with love and mercy. Today this is known as “tough love”—discipline carried out with a firm hand undergirded with love, as prescribed by most child psychologists.

God knows our frailty and is quick to forgive the penitent with infinitely more generosity than we deserve. This great Father-God transcends our finite understanding as He forgives our iniquities, heals our diseases, redeems us from the pit, crowns us with steadfast love and mercy, and satisfies us with good as long as we live.

The opening verse: “Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name!” is particularly appropriate for use in our morning act of adoration as well as throughout the day.

R&D When and under what circumstances have you seen “tough love” bring the hoped-for results?

Prayer: You discipline us because You love us, Lord God, that we might more clearly see Your pathway for our lives.

Tuesday, October 25

Read: Psalm 104

Wonders of Creation

This magnificent psalm is one of paramount celebration of the glory of God’s creation in both animate and inanimate realms.

Like its predecessor, Psalm 103, it begins and ends with exalted praise: “Bless the Lord, O my soul!” The glorification of God for His creative work and continuous maintenance of His universe is the central thread woven through this psalm. This is primarily a hymn of exultation and awe felt by the psalmist as he contemplates the wonders of God’s creation. To the author of these marvels the psalmist renders joyful praise and what a much later scholar of Scripture calls “a solemn prayer for the restoration of the harmony of creation by the banishment from it of all things that cause stumbling, and them that do iniquity.”

In the mind of the psalmist, God takes genuine joy in the creation of His wondrous works and His provision for the same. All living things are utterly dependent upon the creator and His love rejoices in providing for their preservation.

In grateful veneration, the psalmist pledges his unending allegiance to the Lord in songs of praise and meditation pleasing to Him, and ends with the repetition of the opening phrase, “Bless the Lord, O my soul!”

R&D *In what ways does your soul bless the Lord?*

Prayer: *Your creation holds me in awe, Blessed Lord; may I never take for granted the glory of what You provide for us.*

Wednesday, October 26

Read: Psalm 136

His Love Endures Forever

Certain basic truths can stand repetition without risk of monotony, as is the case in this psalm where a recurrent refrain proclaims that God’s steadfast love endures forever. So exultant and inspired is this reiterated conviction that it vigorously transcends redundancy, vividly fixing this truth upon the mind of reader and hearer alike. A paradigm of this litany-like refrain is observable all around us in the natural order: in the succession of seasonal cycles, in the regularity of cosmic events, in human development and continuing life.

The parallel motifs of Yahweh’s great work of creation (vv.5-9) and His subsequent acts of deliverance in Israel’s early history

(vv.10-24) lead us to believe that this psalm was originally intended for use at the great festivals. Further, the repeated refrain suggests that it probably was designed for antiphonal use. Throughout this jubilant hymn, the dominant tone is man's thanksgiving for God's enduring love. What a reassuring affirmation it is to know that God's love is changeless and timeless!

R&D Design a litany based on God's blessings to you, to which this refrain would be appropriate.

Prayer: You inspire the song in my heart, Lord, whether it have the majesty of a psalm or is a simple tune that expresses the joy I feel because I am Yours.

Thursday, October 27

Read: Psalm 137

The Pain of Exile

Of the group of psalms known as psalms of lament, this one is the best known. In it are reviewed the many sorrows and hardships endured by the company of which the writer was a part. It is assumed that they were part of the assemblage brought by the conquering Babylonians to a foreign land since the Babylonians had a policy of taking the finest, most educated, most competent, and probably the wealthiest to Babylon. There they would be re-educated (brainwashed, we today might call it) and forced to work for the benefit of the conquering enemy, while the poor and ineffectual were left behind in the homeland to eke out a bare subsistence.

Small wonder that the psalmist was filled with anger and resentment toward those who had brought about this tragic situation. In our time we have seen countless repetitions of this kind of personal devastation as lands have been conquered and peoples dispossessed, some to wander homeless, others taken to an alien country. To be torn from one's roots of culture, history, associations, and affiliations is a calamitous experience. It is difficult even for us who may have undergone to a much lesser degree uprooting from all that is familiar and dear, to hold on to our faith in God as

the ever-loving, protective Father. Think, then, of what it means to be a modern-day refugee.

R&D *Have you personally known any refugee from a distant land? What have you done to help alleviate the suffering by personal contact, not merely giving a check?*

Prayer: *Lord, people want to know how much we care before they care how much we know.*

Friday, October 28

Read: Psalms 139

The Ever-Present God

This psalm is a very beautiful illustration of our personal relationship with God. There is comfort in the assurance that God is indeed ever present with us. Yet there is also the disquieting awareness that there is nothing we can hide from Him. God knows our every action, our every thought, from the moment of birth until death, even our most assiduously hidden motives.

The more we realize that there is no segment of our life from which we can bar God, the deeper becomes our understanding that while His omnipresence convicts us of sin, it also offers us the life-sustaining hope of a changed life filled with love.

This psalm, one of the finest in the Psalter, is the favorite of many people. Its theme is a pervasive expression of gratitude and an overwhelming sense of wonder. Almost childlike in simplicity and guilelessness, the writer is most human and appealing, and his effervescence in contemplating the incredible goodness of God is contagious.

Realizing that some persons disregard and disdain this wondrous God brings the psalmist to the recognition that there may be lurking even within himself some overlooked wickedness. He prays, therefore, that God will shed His light upon any such sins, eradicate them, and lead him into everlasting peace: "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" (vv.23-24)

R&D *Is it a comfort or discomfort to know that God knows your every thought and action, even those you would rather keep hidden?*

Prayer: *I thank You, Lord, that You know how human I am and love me nonetheless.*

Saturday, October 29

Read: Psalm 145

One of Jesus' Favorites

Jesus loved the psalms and this one in particular is alleged to be one of his favorites, perhaps because in it are found seeds of some of the same tenets contained in the prayer he taught us. We are charged, first of all, to seek the glory of the kingdom, the will of God. We are instructed to wait confidently for God's never-failing provision for our daily needs. It sounds the praises of God's mercy and forgiveness and His care for those who put their trust in Him. It bursts forth in praise of the Almighty. Emphasis is placed upon the thought that God is king and ruler of the kingdom.

Jesus instructed his disciples to pray for the coming of the kingdom. The spiritual reality of this kingdom has been since the beginning of time, but man's rebellion blemished and scarred it. At this point, Jesus broke into history and the kingdom was restored.

The kingdom of God is a progressive operation which continues into the infinity of heaven itself. That truth in no way negates the reality of it in the here and now, for from time to time we catch glimpses of it, intimations of the ultimate reality still to be revealed. Small wonder that the voice of the psalmist breaks forth in exalted praise for his creator!

R&D *When and how have you caught a glimpse or intimation of the reality of God's kingdom?*

Prayer: *Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. Galatians 2:20

I have learned to love Christ personally. For now, we have been through almost ten years of struggles and failures and joys together in the privacy of my life. I have come to want to find new ways to praise Him for giving me a sense of unity, of wholeness, in my life. All of the different personalities I had projected in the various areas of my experience were somehow being melded into one. I didn't have a separate vocabulary, a different kind of humor and a different set of ethics for my business life, my church life, my family life, and my prayer life. It was as if Christ had taken his fist and begun to knock out the partitions in my soul which had made my life so fragmented.

Monday, October 31

Read: Psalm 150

Hallelujah

The Psalter served as hymnbook for ancient Israel for at least 1,000 years before the coming of Christ. Its contents were familiar to the people because of wide use in both corporate and private devotional life. Jesus loved the psalms and frequently quoted from them.

Psalm 150, which closes the final book in the Psalter, known as the Hallelujah Psalm, has sometimes been referred to as the grand finale of the entire spiritual concert! For the writer this was the culmination of worship, reaching a celestial pinnacle of praise of the Almighty. Reading it, we are lifted from the mundane to the sublime and find ourselves joining with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven to sing His praise and magnify His holy name.

All the emotions of worship—the wonder, the joy, the ardor, and the awe—are herein gathered up, along with the experiences of our daily life, and brought as an offering to our Almighty God.

R&D *When have you had this sublime experience in worship?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord God, for the psalms and all they teach us of life and of You.*



Ephesians

Tuesday, November 1

Read: Acts 19:1-12

Introduction

The Epistle to the Ephesians is regarded very highly in the devotional and theological literature of the Christian Church. William Barclay says it has been called the “Queen of the Epistles” and he believes rightly so. He goes on to say that some would go so far as to hold that it is “the highest reach of New Testament thought.”

Ephesians was written while Paul was in prison, probably near the end of his life. (See, for example, 3:1, 4:1 and 6:20). On the other hand, Ephesians is the most impersonal letter Paul ever wrote. It is absent of the personal greetings and intimate messages that are contained in his other letters. The style of this letter also differs from the others; they were written to deal with particular situations whereas Ephesians seems to be more like a theological tract or a spiritual meditation.

Scholars believe that the Epistle to the Ephesians was not, in fact, written to just one church (i.e., the one in Ephesus) but was a circular letter to all of Paul’s churches in Asia. It is the one letter he sent to the eastern churches to tell them that the ultimate unity of all people and all things could only be found in Jesus Christ, and to let them know that the purpose of the Church is to be God’s instrument of reconciliation between people and between people and God.

R&D *What, for you, is the most beautiful book in the Bible? Why?*

Prayer: *We thank You, Lord God, for the apostle Paul and for all we can learn from his life and letters.*

Read: Ephesians 1:1-10

God's Purpose

“What on earth is God doing, for heaven’s sake?” asked Terry Fullam in one of his lectures. Stop and think about it. Not many of us would find it easy to give an answer. When you discover what God has planned for us, and the goal toward which He is working in our history, then you will share the exciting, wonderful “good news” of the gospel. The Epistle to the Ephesians makes inspiring reading, for Paul tells us just what God has in store for us, and precisely how He is working to accomplish it. When we understand God’s purpose, then we learn how we are to live in anticipation of the fulfillment of His plan.

Praise bursts forth from the apostle as he speaks of God’s glorious plan. Words spill forth in a long, unpunctuated sentence singing the glory of God. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places....” He’s filled with joy as he writes of the grace of God and the wonder of His purpose.

God’s purpose is “to unite all things in him.” He plans to overcome all the human barriers that divide us and gather all people everywhere in Christ. They will be gathered from every people, language, nation, and race. They will be united in common devotion and love for God in Christ. All things in heaven and earth will be gathered into a new unity in Christ.

R&D If we share the vision of a new people gathered in Christ, then what are the implications for our life in the Church?

Prayer: Lord, our nation and our world remain divided in so many ways. The answer is unity in Your Son, Jesus Christ. By Your grace and mercy, we beg for revival, renewal, a Great Awakening, or whatever it takes to bring the world to Christ.

Thursday, November 3

Read: Ephesians 1:11-14

Our Destiny

All who believe in Jesus Christ, both Jew and Gentile, share a common destiny. We are destined to live for the praise of God's glory. The glory of God is made known by the lifestyle of the faithful. The members of the church are reconciled, united and sharing God's love with one another. By God's grace, they have overcome many of the human barriers that separate peoples and nations. No longer divided by race, religion, or nationality, the Christians manifest a shared devotion and love that make the onlooker marvel at the reconciliation God has brought about through Christ.

In order to share in this destiny, you must hear the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, believe in Christ, and be sealed with the Holy Spirit. These are the fundamental marks of the faithful Christian. When the members of the church have experienced genuine conversion, have a sincere faith, and have received the Holy Spirit, then their changed lives will bring honor to him who has blessed them.

When we all share those fundamental marks of the Christian and are formed into a united community devoted to Christ and to one another, then we fulfill our destiny—to live for the praise of his glory. When the divisions of the church become more apparent than its unity, the cause may be a lack of hearing the gospel, believing in him, and being sealed with the Holy Spirit.

R&D *How is God being glorified in your life, and in your church?*

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord Christ, for the church in which I am privileged to live, serve, and worship.*

Friday, November 4

Read: Ephesians 1:15-20a

Hope, Riches, Power

Faith in the Lord Jesus and love toward all the saints are the twin attributes of genuine Christianity. But, there's more, and Paul prays unceasingly that the church may receive a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of God. Notice the wonderful

phrase, “the eyes of your hearts enlightened.” He prays for an inner vision, a spiritual revelation of God and His purposes.

We need to know the plan of God for us and for our world. If we knew His purposes better, our faith would be wiser and stronger. And, if we knew the will of God more clearly, we would be much better equipped to explain our faith to those who ask us.

These things we ought to know, deeply, inwardly in our souls. First, what is the hope to which He has called you? Second, what are the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints? And third, what is the immeasurable greatness of His power in us who believe? Paul’s entire epistle answers these questions, but let’s try a few short answers now.

Our hope is to be members of the coming kingdom of God and to live eternally with all the saints. Our hope is to be where Christ is now, in the heavenly places. The riches of that future life are seen in the beauty of the lives of the gathered saints. The power that will bring all this about is the same power that raised Jesus from the grave, resurrection power.

R&D Try to describe your hope in Christ in words non-Christians would understand.

Prayer: My hope, Lord God, is the live this life on earth in such a manner as to be prepared for eternity with You.

Saturday, November 5

Read: Ephesians 1:20-23

Exaltation of Christ

Christian hope is based on the ability of God to accomplish His will in our lives. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in every Christian. Paul calls it “the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe.” With divine energy at work in us, we have no doubt that God will fulfill His promises to us, overcome our sin, raise us from death, and grant us the resurrected life of His kingdom.

Jesus died and was buried. He experienced the ultimate weakness. In the grave, he could do nothing. All depended on God and His ability to raise the dead. The power of God brought

Jesus to life on Easter morning and, at the ascension, exalted him as Lord in heaven. Similarly, when we are baptized, we are symbolically drowned in the waters. God raises us from our spiritual death, and by His Spirit, grants us new and eternal life. We can't save ourselves. We are saved by grace through faith.

Faith involves trust in the ability of God to accomplish His purposes in and through us. Paul reminds us, in Philippians 2:13, "God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." In response, we yield ourselves to God's working, and submit ourselves to His guidance. Have every confidence that God is able to finish what He has begun in you, and by the immeasurable greatness of His power to raise you with Christ to new and eternal life.

R&D How have you experienced the power of God at work in your life?

Prayer: Through Your Holy Spirit, Lord God, You provide guidance for us in every aspect of our lives if we are attuned to that guidance from within.

Sunday, November 6

Sabbath Time

And when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Luke 10:31

It has never ceased to amaze me that we Christians have developed a kind of selective vision which allows us to be deeply and sincerely involved in worship and church activities and yet almost totally pagan in the day in day out guts of our business lives...and never realize it.

Monday, November 7

Read: Ephesians 2:1-7

Our Resurrection

The immeasurable greatness of God's power not only raised Jesus from the dead but made us alive also. Radical change marks conversion to Christ, a change so profound it is described as dying and rising again. "You were dead through trespasses and sins," declared Paul. Our death was not physical, but spiritual.

Many people who look alive are dead inside. They appear to be healthy, vigorous, and strong. But there is no love of God in them, no response to the gift of Christ, no excitement in learning about spiritual things. “The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Lacking spiritual vitality, we follow the course of this world floating along on the uncertain popular opinions for guidance in morality and ethics. The prince of this world, or Satan, blinds our minds and diverts us from the ways of health and peace. We obey the spirit of disobedience that leads us to become rebellious, self-centered, dishonest, and greedy. From God’s point of view, we are already dead when our spirits are not alive.

When we were still dead through our trespasses, God resurrected us with Christ and gave us a place with Christ in the heavens. Born-again, resurrected, converted, our lives change, change radically. For once we were dead, but now we are alive, alive to life, to love, and to God.

R&D Think back. How has your life changed since you accepted Christ as your Savior?

Prayer: Life in Christ, Lord God, is eternal life now and in the world to come. Praise You for this precious gift.

Tuesday, November 8

Read: Ephesians 2:8-10

Salvation by Grace

Today’s reading is short, but powerful. Spend some time meditating on its message. In fact, try to memorize verse eight, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God.” The Protestant Reformation of Luther, Calvin, and Cranmer was based upon this biblical truth of salvation by grace through faith alone.

Notice the past tense of the verb “have been saved.” Our salvation was accomplished in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When we are incorporated into Christ, then we share in his finished work. Once we are his, our rescue from sin, death,

and hell is complete. In principle, all is done. Now, we simply have to live it out in our daily lives.

We have done nothing to deserve this gracious gift of God, but to receive it thankfully. In response, we believe the gospel of what God has accomplished for us in Christ. We accept him as our Savior and Lord, and the gracious gift of God is ours.

We are God's workmanship. He created us. He recreated us. He has destined us to be conformed to the image of His Son. All of our new life in Christ comes, not by our own efforts, but by the working of God in our hearts and souls. We can't boast about our Christianity. All we are, and all we shall be, is the work of God by His grace.

It's humbling, but comforting, to know that we are safe in our Father's hand. All depends on Him, who is so dependable.

R&D List the gifts of God's grace you have received through Christ.

Prayer: May Your grace reflect through us, Lord God, that the world may know Your Son Jesus.

Wednesday, November 9

Read: Ephesians 2:11-13

Inclusion of Gentiles

To appreciate the wonder of God's grace, remember what you used to be. Paul reminds us that we were Gentiles in the flesh. We were not the people of God. Instead, we were separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenant of promise. Outsiders, pagans, the lost, are all terms to describe most of us, or our ancestors, prior to God's gracious act in Christ.

Prior to Christ, you had to be born a Jew, a member of the race, in order to belong to God's people. If not a Jew by race, then you might convert, provided you went through baptism and circumcision. Until the coming of Jesus, the holy people were an exclusive community racially limited to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Worst of all, without Christ we would have remained "having no hope and without God in the world." But now, since Jesus

has come, the door has been flung open, the curtain of the temple rent in twain, and we “who were far off have been brought near.” The blood of Christ, his sacrifice upon the cross for the sins of all humanity, has made our atonement, and made it possible for Gentiles to be included in the same family with the Jews, forming a new, international people of God.

Breaking down the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile was momentous in the first century. But, just think what it means in our own time, for the unity of all people everywhere in Christ.

R&D Who are the Gentiles of our time and how may they be united with us in Christ?

Prayer: We lift to you the lost, Lord Christ, those who have not given their lives to you despite all you did for us and for them. Help us to reach them, Lord, before they miss the life in you now and forever.

Thursday, November 10

Read: Ephesians 2:14-18

Christ the Peacemaker

I was privileged to attend a conference in Canterbury, England years ago. There were clergy and laity there from all over the world. Their costumes, language, and colors of skin testified to the wide variety of God’s people. We were different from one another racially, nationally, economically, politically, and socially. And yet, we were one, united in our common devotion to God in Christ, united by the one Spirit and made members of the one Church. The loving unity was almost palpable.

A week later, I was able to carry a banner in the procession of the bishops of the Anglican Communion as they entered the cathedral for the beginning of the Lambeth Conference. What a thrilling experience to see how Christ had united us from all corners of the globe! Christ is the hope of the world. He is creating “one new man,” a new humanity. All are born again, this time from above, sharing a common origin. No longer separated by the rules and regulations of religion, we are drawn together by the loving grace of our God. If we can experience unity within one denomination, why not ecumenically? In our hearts we know we

are all members of the new humanity in Christ, but we still need to give that conviction concrete expression.

God is uniting all humanity in Christ. That's His purpose in our world. There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, but we are all one in Christ.

R&D *How is Christ's uniting power visible in your church?*

Prayer: *Blessed Lord, let nothing separate us from our brothers and sisters in Christ. Break down the artificial lines of division between us that we may see clearly Your purpose for us all.*

Friday, November 11

Read: Ephesians 2:19-22

The Living Temple

Non-Jews, or Gentiles, were considered by the people of Israel to be “strangers and sojourners” at best. Now, Christ has brought both Jew and Gentile into a new humanity where the old distinctions no longer apply. Those who once were outcasts have now been brought into the fold and share equally with the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Gentiles are now fellow citizens. To hold citizenship in the Roman Empire was a privilege given only to a few. Now, we are all fellow citizens with the saints in the empire, or kingdom of God. We are a new nation, sharing equally in all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities of citizenship, ruled by the Lord Jesus Christ himself.

Gentiles are now members of the household of God. No longer slaves, we have become the children of the Father, sharing with the first-born Son as joint heirs with Christ. Now, we are blessed to belong, to be loved, to have the special status of being a part of the household of God.

Gentiles are living stones built into a holy temple in the Lord. Not a temple built with hands, this temple is based upon the solid foundation of the apostolic teaching, conforming to the cornerstone of the teaching of Jesus himself.

In every respect, Gentiles share with Jews in the promises of the covenant. They are citizens of the kingdom, members of the household, and a holy temple unto God.

R&D How does your church exhibit these marks of the covenant?

Prayer: You rescued those who were lost, Lord Christ, and we continue to need your rescuing operation here and throughout the world.

Saturday, November 12

Read: Ephesians 3:1-6

Apostle's Mandate

Paul's dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus not only transformed him personally, but gave him a specific ministry, a very special "stewardship of God's grace." He was to preach to the Gentiles. He had received insight into the mystery of Christ, an insight hidden from ages past. The Christ, or the Messiah, was not the savior of the Jews only, but of all humanity, Jew and Gentile alike. The Holy Spirit gave a new revelation to the Christian apostles and prophets, "how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel."

We are the successors of those New Testament apostles and prophets. Our mission is to announce the reconciling, uniting grace of God in Jesus Christ to all people everywhere. In our personal and corporate lives, we exhibit the wonders of this new community of faith and love. If our message of reconciliation through Christ is to be believed, we shall need to live the way we preach.

Every congregation has the potential of revealing the mystery of Christ, the uniting power of his grace to make of one family people of all nations on earth. Overcoming racism has more than social consequences. It's vital to the integrity of the message we proclaim. What if the world were to see the wonder of Christ's reconciling power binding us into one family? "They will know we are Christians by our love!"

R&D How might we bear witness to the inclusiveness of the community of Christ?

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, open our doors to those who seek you, regardless of their race, culture or social status.*

Sunday, November 13

Sabbath Time

Until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. Ephesians 4:13

Christianity is not a status at which one arrives; it is a life in which one matures.

Monday, November 14

Read: Ephesians 3:7-13

Plan for the Church

By God's grace, Paul was given the privilege to preach Christ and make people see the plan of his mystery. Can we recover the sense of this privilege in our time? Sharing Christ, telling people about God's reconciling work in our world is not a chore, but a blessed gift of His grace. To be the messenger of God, carrying news of the immeasurable riches of Christ is one of the highest privileges anyone could be granted. And we, the members of the Church, have been commanded by Christ himself, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15).

The "mystery hidden from the ages" was being revealed by the creation of the Church, a community of Jew and Gentile united in common devotion and love. Through the Church, by means of the uniting power of the gospel to bring people together from every race and nation, the secret of God's saving purpose would become visible. The Church is integral to the gospel, for our salvation is not private and individual. We are baptized into the Body of Christ, into the saved community, the covenant people of God. An international community of love, worship and service bears witness to the wonder of Christ's reconciliation. The many divisions among the churches of today oppose our divine calling to be God's demonstration or model of the coming kingdom. The ecumenical movement leads us toward the proper goal. May God help us find the best ways to reach that goal.

R&D *How do you feel about the privilege of evangelism and church membership?*

Prayer: *You have endowed us, Lord God, with the message of all messages. Give us the courage and the opportunity to share that message with those with whom we come into contact day by day.*

Tuesday, November 15

Ephesians 3:14-19

Filled with Fullness

Paul prays fervently, on his knees, for the Church and all its members. He asks the father of the family to make it possible for all his children to live in unity, peace, and love.

In his prayer, Paul seeks four blessings for us. First, that we may be “strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man.” His choice of words emphasizes the power of the Holy Spirit to transform our inner persons, to change our minds and redirect our ambitions. Second, Paul prays that “Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” The abiding presence of Christ may be maintained through practice, by faith. In Galatians 2:20, Paul wrote, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” The old self-centeredness changes into a Christ-centeredness in those who have faith. Third, Paul prays we may be so rooted and grounded in love that we comprehend the full dimensions of God’s love for humanity. Grounded in God’s love, we share His vision of an all-inclusive community of the faithful overcoming the barriers of prejudice and racism. Fourth, he prays we may know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge. Knowing, in a biblical sense, means to have a thorough personal knowledge. Knowing the love of Christ experientially will, indeed, help us be filled with all the fullness of God.

We need not only to know about God and His purposes in Christ; we need to experience His love in our own lives. For this experience, the apostle prays.

R&D *What are the dimensions of the love of Christ?*

Prayer: *It is not until we have given our lives fully to you, Lord Christ, that we can fully know the depth of your great love for us.*

Wednesday, November 16

Read: Ephesians 3:20-21

The Power at Work

The essence of the Christian faith consists in what God does for us, not what we do for Him. Paul prays to “him who by the power at work within us.” The formation of the spiritual life takes place by the power of the Holy Spirit given to us. The change in attitude, the change in behavior, the growth in love and obedient service of the Christian person come about by the “power at work within us.”

More than that, the power of the Spirit is “able to do more than we ask or think.” His working in our hearts and souls depends not on our ability to ask or to pray. The Spirit knows our needs and he intercedes for us with groanings that cannot be uttered. We have the assurance that his power seeks out our every need, and addresses that need with the grace of God.

By our own strength, we can never fulfill the commandment of love, but by His power working in us, all things are possible. The attempt at self-reformation often sounds like Paul’s own experience that he shared in Romans 7. We can identify with the struggle. We know what is good, but do not do it. We know what is evil, but do not avoid it. Try as we may, we often fail to do the right, even when we want to do the right.

How freeing it is to realize that if we will confess our weakness and open our hearts to the Spirit, God will do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

R&D How can we be more receptive to God’s power working in us?

Prayer: Gracious Lord, make us ever-present to Your Holy Spirit within us.

Thursday, November 17

Read: Ephesians 4:1-10

Worthy of the Calling

In yesterday’s reading, we heard the apostle begging God, in humble prayer, to strengthen the members of the church by the

Holy Spirit. In today's passage, Paul begs the people to lead a life worthy of the calling to which they have been called.

We've been called to be the vanguard of the new, united family of God's people being formed by Jesus Christ. That's God's purpose in Christ, "to unite all things in him." Through our life together, the Church is to make known the manifold wisdom of God. We are not only to proclaim the gospel, but to live it visibly in our world.

Unity demands some special qualities of character—lowliness, meekness, patience, forbearance, and love. You will recognize these as uncharacteristic of our fallen human nature, but the fruit, or the product, of the indwelling of the Spirit of Christ in the heart of the faithful. Paul bids us to be eager, to spare no effort, to maintain the unity of the Spirit.

Our unity is founded on seven affirmations: one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all. The repetition of our oneness stresses the importance of harmony and peace within the Christian community. How else will people be able to see the reconciling power of God at work in our world? In the Church, all human divisions should be overcome and the peace of God rule in our hearts.

R&D How can we overcome our many divisions and be a Church united?

Prayer: Lord God, the individual spirituality of Your Christian people may differ from one another, and that leads to different forms of worship and other approaches to serving You. But bring us together across these differences to be at unity in Your truth that we may be at one with You.

Friday, November 18

Read: Ephesians 4:11-14

Equip the Saints

When Christ ascended into heaven and was enthroned as Lord, he "gave gifts to his people." The promised gift of the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost and, in turn, the Spirit distributed charisma or gifts to the members of the Church. The variety of gifts

is listed in 1 Corinthians 12-14, but here in Ephesians emphasis is upon specific ministers sent by Christ and filled by his Spirit.

“Some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers.” People who fill these functions today would usually be called “clergy.” The ordained normally serve in these capacities. The prophets are today’s preachers. The evangelists are especially gifted for converting people to Christ. Pastors and teachers describe the work of the parish priest or minister.

The purpose of the ordained ministers is “to equip the saints for the work of ministry.” The saints are all the people of God, the laity. The work of ministry is shared by both the ordained and the lay members. The clergy are to equip the laity to do the work of ministry. The work of the ministry cannot be limited to the confines of the church building but must reach out into the world. Laity are in the world every day in their work, their recreation, and in their leisure. They are called to be witnesses of Christ in their own spheres of influence.

What an impact we could have in the world, if we all accepted the call to “do the work of the ministry.”

R&D Share with one another how you carry out your ministry.

Prayer: Lord Christ, show me the ministry you would have me perform today and in the days ahead.

Saturday, November 19

Read: Ephesians 4:15-16

Upbuilding in Love

Rather than being tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, the apostle urges the church to grow into a stable maturity. The way to achieve maturity, he teaches, is by truth and love. “Speaking the truth in love” really means “truthing in love.” For the members of the church are not only to speak the truth, but to maintain the truth, do the truth, and live the truth.

The truth to which Paul refers is God’s revelation to us in His Son, Jesus Christ. Holding the essentials of the faith as given by the apostles, living that faith, and sharing that faith, the church will become stronger and stronger. New teachings, new winds of

doctrine destabilize the church and prevent the members from reaching the goal of maturity in Christ.

The truth, however, must be shared in love. Harsh, unyielding adherence to truth can revert to legalism. When love is lacking, the defense of the truth can become destructive, accusative, and divisive. Paul insists on both truth and love, living the gospel in the way Jesus lived it. There are no conflicts between love and truth, for God is love and obedience to God demands a life of love.

In an age when our churches are being “tossed about by every wind of doctrine,” the apostle shows us the way to renewed harmony and strength. Maturity and stability are found when we all agree in the one truth Christ revealed and help one another to live that truth in love.

R&D How would our churches be changed if we followed Paul's advice?

Prayer: Help us always, Dear Lord, to speak the truth in love.

Sunday, November 20

Sabbath Time

“Lord, teach us to pray.” Luke 11:1

Finally, I began to see that prayer is not a series of requests to get God to help me do things I think need to be done. Prayer is a direction of life, a focusing of one's most personal and deepest attention Godward. The purpose is to love God and learn to know Him so well that our wills, our actions will be more and more aligned with His, until even our unconscious reactions and purposes will have the mark of His love, His life about them. Prayer was no longer an “activity.” It had become the continuing language of that relationship God designed to fulfill a human life.

Monday, November 21

Read: Ephesians 4:17-24

Old and New

Ancient baptismal rites were dramatic, portraying the end of an old way of life, and the beginning of the new. Candidates put off their old clothes, were immersed three times in the name of the Trinity, and then, upon rising from the water put on new, white

robes. Using baptismal symbolism, Paul urges Christians, “Put off your old nature—and put on the new nature.”

We should no longer live as people who do not know God. Our status has changed. We’ve been enlightened. In our former condition, we were “darkened in our understanding, alienated from the life of God because of ignorance.” Not only ignorance, but hardness of heart dominated the former life, leading to callous behavior and “every kind of uncleanness.”

Now we are to be “renewed in the spirit of your minds.” Baptism followed on after conversion, after a renewal of the mind had taken place. The candidate heard and believed the gospel of Jesus Christ, and changed his attitude toward God, his world, and himself. The truth, revealed by Christ, now becomes the guiding principle of his ethics.

The new nature received at baptism is created in the likeness of God, a phrase that reminds us of the original creation of Adam and Eve. If we have been born again by faith, then the new life ought to show in the altered behavior of those in whom the Spirit of Christ dwells. God has given us the possibility of a new life, but we need to “put it on” by changing our attitude and our conduct.

R&D *How do you put on the new nature?*

Prayer: *Lord God, help us to live fully into the blessed new life You have given to those who have given themselves to Your Son Jesus.*

Tuesday, November 22

Read: Ephesians 4:25-32

Speak the Truth

Remembering the opening of this chapter when Paul begged us to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” we now hear some practical instruction about how to maintain that unity.

First, he bids us “speak the truth.” The truth may very well refer to the previous verses where Paul spoke of “the truth in Jesus.” He would be referring to the essence of the gospel, and the teachings of our Master. And yet, the community of Christ has long

seen this passage as encouraging us to avoid telling falsehoods and sharing the realities with one another.

Especially helpful is the exhortation to “be angry but do not sin.” As we know, anger bottled up and held within does lead to the sins of wrath and hatred. Not letting the sun go down before we settle our disputes with one another, gives no room to the devil to allow our anger to settle into malice.

Grieving the Holy Spirit would be any behavior that would make him sad or unhappy. Can you imagine God the Spirit weeping over his beloved people when he sees them acting in harmful ways? Love does care so deeply for the beloved that “bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander” would bring pain and sorrow. The Holy Spirit, who lives within, guides us, not only by positive suggestion, but also by sensitivity we develop to the way our behavior affects our loving Father in heaven.

R&D Discuss how to be angry, but not sin.

Prayer: Our behavior, Lord, should reflect how we know You want us to live.

Wednesday, November 23

Read: Ephesians 5:1-2

Imitators of God

Children copy their parents, mimic them. Parents have more influence in the formation of their children’s character than they often realize. It’s surprising and sometimes frightening to see yourself reflected in your child’s behavior. The biblical warning that the sins of the fathers (parents) are passed on to succeeding generations proves true in our experience.

Now that we have been born again and put on our new nature as the children of God, Paul urges us to “be imitators of God.” We learn from God and seek to mimic His attitudes and behavior. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, suggested that we prove our status as children by our conduct: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:45 NRSV).

We have the example of the perfect child of God, Jesus Christ. He so exactly reflected the nature of his Father in heaven, that he could say to his disciples, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9 NRSV). The way Jesus imitated the Father was to “walk in love.” Walking is often a biblical metaphor for our total behavior, how we conduct ourselves in daily living. Self-giving, sacrificial love for others is the characteristic note of Jesus, and of all those who follow him.

As the loving obedience of Jesus was better than any sacrificial offering, better than incense and burnt offerings, so our sacrifice to God is a life offered to God, holy and acceptable to Him (Romans 12:1).

R&D How can we change our behavior and be imitators of God?

Prayer: We are in a process of growth, step-by-step, as we learn to imitate you, Lord Jesus.

Thursday, November 24

Read: Ephesians 5:3-14

Children of the Light

Darkness and light are metaphors for the contrast between evil and good, ignorance and truth, immorality and purity. Contrasting the distinctive conduct of the Christian with the immorality of the secular culture, Paul urges us to follow the way of the light.

First, he warns us of the certainty of judgment. Those who continue to practice immorality suffer the wrath of God as they receive the consequences of harmful deeds and broken relationships. More serious even than the consequences of their deeds, would be the loss of inheritance in the coming kingdom of Christ. Paul makes it clear that there are prices to pay now, in this life, and a dreadful judgment to come for the continual practice of impurity, covetousness, fornication and the like.

Then Paul announces that we are “light in the Lord.” The light of Christ illuminates our former darkness, and now our minds are opened to see the truth, our consciences are cleansed to seek the right, and our lives are amended to do the good. The fruit

of the light shines out of us in all that is good and right and true. We prove ourselves children of the light because of the good and honest way we live our lives.

Light exposes what people try to hide, what they do in secret. We now live in the light, with our entire lives open to God. So, we live as people whose lives are an open book, with nothing to hide from God or other people.

R&D Discuss the contrast between light and darkness in our society.

Prayer: May I dispel the darkness around me by letting the light of Christ shine forth in my life.

Friday, November 25

Read: Ephesians 5:15-20

Filled with the Spirit

Two contrasts present themselves before us in this passage. First, Paul contrasts the wise and the foolish, and then he speaks of being drunk with wine and filled with the Spirit.

In the Greek society to which he was writing, wisdom was highly prized. The wise man conducted himself in accordance with the accumulated knowledge of his society, carefully avoiding any excesses. Aristotle, the great philosopher, wrote of the golden mean as the wise choice between two extremes. The Christian, likewise, was not to be unwise (agnostic), but understanding what the will of the Lord is. God's will, rather than the golden mean, defined their ethic.

The contrast between drunkenness and being filled with the Spirit seems strange. They are not at all the same. In fact, alcohol is a depressant and does not make one genuinely happy. To be filled with the Spirit, however, is true inspiration from God, the thrill of His presence, the joy of His love, the excitement of sharing in His ministry. We are filled with the Spirit when we share the enthusiasm of Jesus, his devotion to the Father, his love for others, his care for the poor, and his pure and holy life.

The filling of the Spirit produces music, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, always and for everything giving thanks to the Lord Jesus. The truly wise understand

that it is not drunkenness but the filling of the Spirit that makes the heart glad and the people happy.

R&D *Share your experiences of the filling of the Spirit.*

Prayer: *May the joy in our heart reflect our love of you, Lord Jesus.*

Saturday, November 26

Read: Ephesians 5:21-33

Marriage

Being filled with the Holy Spirit, as we saw yesterday, produces a song in the heart and thanksgiving on the lips. In today's lesson, we learn how the Spirit transforms marriage.

“Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Submitting to one another means taking one's assigned place in life. In the military services, one is given an assigned place in the ranks. When the sergeant shouts, “Fall in!” everyone finds his place and stands at attention, ready to fulfill his part of the company's mission. Submission is a bit like that.

Paul urges wives and husbands to take their assigned places in the marriage. He does not suggest that one is superior to another, nor that one is to lord it over the other. He simply asks wives to serve their husbands, and husbands to serve their wives.

There is a mutual ministry to one another in marriage. Each couple defines the nature of their own relationship. Who pays the bills or who disciplines the children may differ from time to time. What is unchanging is the principle of mutual submission, taking one's proper role in the relationship and fulfilling that role out of love for the other.

The quality of a husband's love for his wife compares to the love Christ has for the Church. The emphasis in the passage is on the husband's responsibility to be the initiator of a loyal, sacrificial love. Responding to his love, the wife loves in return. Each gives of self to benefit the other.

R&D *How do you understand mutual submission?*

Prayer: *Lord God, marriage is under attack in our day. Help us, as Christian married couples, show the world what godly marriage is all about.*

Sunday, November 27

Sabbath Time

“You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!”
Matthew 23:24

This new fellowship [in Christ] was brought into existence when some deeply concerned laymen found the institutional church defensive concerning the structured programs and, in many cases, unprepared to face the problems confronting this new body of “missionaries”—Baptist, Methodist, Episcopal, and Presbyterian laymen who were trying to commit their whole lives to Christ—who found that they had more in common with each other than with some of the pillars of their own denominations.

Monday, November 28

Read: Ephesians 6:1-4

Parenthood

Continuing the emphasis on Spirit-filled living, Paul applies the principle of mutual submission to parents and children. Each is to take his or her proper role in the relationship.

Children are expected to obey “in the Lord.” By obeying their parents, children are serving the Lord, fulfilling their assigned role in God’s new society, the Church. Not only is obedience right, but it is one of the Ten Commandments. But it is a commandment with a promise, “that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth.”

As the important building block of human society, a fully functional family where parents love one another, and children obey their parents in the Lord, will produce strong, healthy people who in turn will bring about the good of the nation and the world.

Parental discipline is qualified. Rather than provoke children to anger through harsh, unreasonable demands and painful punishment, the Christian parent uses the discipline and instruction of the Lord. The original language asks for nurture of the children, to care for them, to feed them, to provide what is necessary

for growth. Instead of unreasonable demands, the parent guides, corrects, and teaches for the continued growth of the youngster.

Our children also need to be disciplined, to learn how to follow Jesus and to become his people in the world. Parents teach their children by word and example how to be Christ's person in the world.

R&D How can our homes be schools for training young disciples?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, we pray for our children that they may give their lives to Your Son Jesus and serve him all the days of their lives.

Tuesday, November 29

Read: Ephesians 6:5-9

Serving Christ

Submission to one another out of reverence for Christ defines not only family relationships, but also that of master and slave, employer and employee. Each has a function to fulfill for the common good.

Paul was concerned here with relationships, not with the morality of slavery. In the Roman Empire, slaves constituted the work force, not only domestic servants and manual laborers, but educated people as well—doctors, teachers, and administrators. Paul's instructions can easily be applied to our modern relationships in factory, office, or shop.

Obedience is due our superiors with singleness of heart, or a pure motivation. What a liberating thought, that we serve not in the way of boss-pleasers but as servants (slaves) of Christ. As Paul wrote in Colossians 3:23, "Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men; you are serving the Lord Christ."

Masters, employers, supervisors are to practice the golden rule: "Do the same to them." They have a Master in heaven, the same Master whom their employees serve. All work is done for Christ, with the integrity and devotion Christ elicits from the faithful.

The reward of our labor comes ultimately from the Lord. The laborer is worthy of his hire, of course. But the true recom-

pense for faithful service comes from Jesus Christ our Lord, who at the last day will say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

R&D *How might you apply this principle in your occupation?*

Prayer: *Make us grateful of the means of our employment and livelihood, Lord, that we can see it in the sense of serving You.*

Wednesday, November 30

Read: Ephesians 6:10-24

The Whole Armor of God

In concluding the epistle, Paul reminds us that the Christian life is a battle against unseen foes. In our struggle against evil, we need to be fully protected. Using the analogy of the armament of the Roman soldier, Paul urges us to be equipped for the conflict every faithful follower of Jesus will endure. We are contending against the wiles of the devil, not against flesh and blood (humans) but against “the world rulers of this present darkness,” against hatred, prejudice, malice, and so forth.

If the battle be against spiritual forces, the armor needs to be spiritual as well. We need the whole armor of God to enable us to stand, to hold our ground and not allow the enemy to retake our territory. The demonic powers possess superhuman abilities. Our defense needs also to be superhuman, the armor only God can supply.

Our responsibility is to take the armor of God and put it on. We will be protected, not by iron breastplates or wooden shields, but by the gifts and graces bestowed by Christ. We take and put on truth, righteousness, the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, and the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God.

Paul reminds us of our baptism, when we took off the old clothes of the former life and put on the new white robes of the righteousness of Christ. We were baptized into the unity, peace and love of the new community Christ has created. In order to maintain that unity, each of us will need to stand firm, wear the whole armor and pray fervently.

R&D *How does the above apply to the tensions in our church today?*

Prayer: *Blessed Lord, remind us to put on the whole armor of God each morning for our protection during the day.*



Discipleship

Advent Study

Thursday, December 1

Read: Matthew 28:19

Introduction

Our study for Advent is the theme of Discipleship. Advent is a time for serious reflection on ultimate things. During this month we will be asking you to think about your call to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

What is a disciple? How are we to understand the call and demands of discipleship in light of the gracious gift of new life given by God and not by works of our hands? Teachings on discipleship to people who have not received this good news will sound like mere words. For the sake of this series, here is our working definition of a disciple: A disciple is a person who has received the good news of Jesus Christ and who has made an intentional decision to follow him in a disciplined manner.

Notice three important words in this definition. First is the word “received.” We must always remember that the invitation to follow Jesus Christ as his disciple is his initiative. We receive it as good news, God’s grace and gift. We cannot earn it or make ourselves worthy of it. Second is the word “intentional.” We must respond to his invitation and follow him to learn of him. Third is the word “disciplined.” The Christian life is one to be led in a disciplined way. This means that it is not by whim or when it is convenient, but at all times and in all places.

R&D Have you heard Jesus’ call and are you following him in an intentional way?

Prayer: May we recognize that among Christians, Lord Christ, disciples are not a special class of followers; we are all called to be your disciples.

Friday, December 2

Read: Mark 1:14-20

Called

Much is written today about spiritual awakening. There is a growing concern, especially among mainline churches, with decreasing membership. Yet, the New Testament has little to say about “church members.” Even the word evangelism is seldom found in Scripture. The New Testament has a great deal to say about discipleship. For example, the great commission according to Matthew is to “go and make disciples.”

Jesus began his ministry by calling people to follow him. To this call he added a promise, “I will make you fishers of men.” The first disciples were not theologians, pastors, or religious leaders. They were ordinary men and women. It seemed Jesus’ intention to build his Church using such people.

Today we meet four people, Simon, Andrew, James, and John who accepted this invitation and immediately left their daily responsibilities and followed after him. They put this before all else. Their actions could be seen in worldly terms as irresponsible, but now we know that they were the first to make the Messiah first in their lives.

R&D Have you made the call to follow Jesus the first priority of your life? Explain.

Prayer: Jesus Christ is life. Everything else is just details.

Saturday, December 3

Read: John 1:43-47

Call of Philip and Nathanael

Jesus called Philip and he immediately went to Nathanael. Nathanael is skeptical of Philip’s claim to have found the Messiah. Yet, he accepts Philip’s invitation to come and see.

The encounter between Jesus and Nathanael reveals Nathanael as a true seeker who holds no falsehood. Nathanael responds to Jesus’ foreknowledge of him by affirming Jesus’ messiahship. These words lead to an amazing statement by Jesus. He

promises that Nathanael “shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

The disciples did literally see the messengers of God (that is what the word “angel” means) communicating with Jesus, but the passage means more. It promises that to those who earnestly seek after him, we will see the divine nature of Jesus revealed in extraordinary ways.

No one can know Jesus Christ fully until he or she has made a decision to follow him. Faith in him reveals more to us than knowledge about him can. One of the disciples of Jesus who had a profound effect upon me was an elderly grandmother in my first church who had only a fourth-grade education. In her daily life, she modeled a closeness to Jesus that I still long for and seek. Her knowledge of Jesus was vastly superior to that of many theologians whom I had met in seminary. How is this possible? Because, faith in Jesus is the prerequisite for truly knowing him.

R&D *Who is the person who has best modeled for you a relationship to Jesus Christ?*

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord Jesus, for those you have led to me to help me grow as your disciple.*

Sunday, December 4

Sabbath Time

I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Romans 12:1

God, I realized, doesn't want your time. He wants your will; and if you give Him your will, He'll begin to show you life as you've never seen it before.

Monday, December 5

Read: Matthew 9:9

The Call of Matthew

Matthew was a tax collector. In the Roman Empire, tax collectors bid for the legal right to collect taxes. They received a percentage of the receipts they could collect. The more efficient they were at collecting taxes, the more their income.

It is one thing to have to pay taxes to the Romans, but Jews found themselves having to pay taxes to their own people. Such lackeys were seen as turncoats, traitors to their own people. They were hated by the common people and were the targets of zealots.

Matthew probably had a good justification for his work. For example, someone had to do it, why not him? His income and social standing among the Romans could have offset the rejection he found among his people, but he was an outcast listed with publicans, sinners, and tax collectors.

It was from his work that Jesus called him. Jesus made no prior condition to the call. His call of Matthew probably did not sit well with the other disciples. In the call of Matthew, two principles of God's grace are shown.

First, Matthew was called right where he was. That is where we are called. God starts with us right where we are. Second, God's grace is extended to Matthew just as it was to Peter, James, and John. God is no respecter of people. He loves each person. He loves the fisherman, the tax collector, and the housewife equally.

R&D How have you experienced God's grace and acceptance?

Prayer: Truly you want us, Lord Jesus, to bloom where we are planted.

Tuesday, December 6

Read: Matthew 9:10-13

Restoration of Matthew

Matthew's call and his acceptance also restored him to his community. He was reunited with fellow Jews who before his call held him in contempt. Isn't it amazing whom Jesus was willing to call? His disciples numbered men who without Jesus would have hated one another.

Our call to discipleship is like that. We often find that our call to follow Jesus brings us into relationship with people we dislike.

Once I met a couple who were looking for a church. They had lived in our city for five years but were unable to find a church that met their expectations. After listening to their account of their doctrinal purity, I realized that they could never find a church with

people in it who met their standards. They wanted perfection. I ended the conversation with this challenge: “If you find a church that suites you, I hope you will not join it!” They were surprised by my comment, but I went on to explain. “If you do find the perfect church and you join it, you will spoil it.”

I knew that our congregation was made up of people like Matthew—people I would not choose to like. I loved them, however, because I was related to them through a common Savior and a common call. In the family of God, just like our own family, we don’t get to choose our brothers and sisters.

R&D *Who are the Matthews in your life?*

Prayer: *hank you, Lord Christ, that our congregation is made up of a variety of people I might not know if they were not my brothers and sisters in Christ.*

Wednesday, December 7

Read: Mark 10:17-22

Sacrifice for Discipleship

Today’s Scripture presents us with one of the most demanding aspects of discipleship. The rich young ruler came earnestly desiring to know how to obtain eternal life. His answer to Jesus reflects someone trying to do what is right. Why did Jesus demand from this man something he seemingly had not demanded from others?

It could be that Jesus perceived in this person’s manner and behavior that he was rich. Jesus knew that possessions could be the chief obstacles to following him. He required a sacrifice from the young man that suggested a single-mindedness and determination.

In the story we are told that he turned away because he was very wealthy. Although this man was seeking spiritual life, he could not see how his possessions kept him from the next step. Jesus’ request was one of love. He wanted the best for the man. He was saddened by his inability to respond.

This example shows us the importance of not only putting our relationship with Jesus first, but of surrendering everything that would compete with that relationship. Jesus may not ask us

to literally “sell all we have and give it to the poor.” Yet we can be certain that following him means that we should be willing to surrender all that we have to put him first.

Before Jesus needs to demand this of us, we can examine our own lives. Are there things that separate us from Christ or compete for his central role in our lives?

R&D Is there anything keeping you from a wholehearted commitment to follow Christ? Explain.

Prayer: Protect me, Blessed Lord, from anything that would interfere with my relationship with you.

Thursday, December 8

Read: Luke 14:15-33

Count the Cost

While Jesus called people to walk with him as disciples, today we are confronted with his response to those who wanted to volunteer. He warns them to count the cost.

Years ago, I learned a method for sharing my faith with others. We call this evangelism. I discovered that, using the method suggested, I could lead a person easily to a prayer of commitment to Christ. Soon I began to notice that only a very few of the people who would read this prayer would show any real sign of having made a commitment. When I went back to Scripture, I found that the method that I had learned was faulty. Jesus did not make the call to follow him an easy method to which anyone could respond. Jesus demanded that a person “count the cost.”

I tried this. I still used the method, but when a person responded easily, I ended by suggesting that the person not say the prayer unless he or she were willing to count the cost of this decision. Now people responded differently. Many said that they needed to “think about this decision.” A few seemed immediately ready, and, not surprisingly, they seemed to act on their decision.

The Church needs to follow the example of Jesus and avoid any method that promises easy decisions. The road of following Jesus is often a hard one. It will demand everything of us. We, too, are to count the cost.

R&D *To what extent are you willing to pay the price of discipleship?*

Prayer: *Help me to reflect back to on life to see if I am showing signs of a disciple, Blessed Jesus.*

Friday, December 9

Read: John 8:1-11

Unconditional Forgiveness

In contrast to the last two lessons in which we looked at the cost and the demands of the decision to follow Christ, today we look at forgiveness.

The story of the woman taken in adultery is a story of unconditional forgiveness. We have heard it so often as Christians that its impact is sometimes lost. We need to remember that the original audience that heard this story would have identified with the crowd. They would have been struck by Jesus' quickness to forgive. They would have demanded justice.

The point of this story for the early Church and for us is that no matter how horrendous the crime, Jesus offers to us a way of forgiveness. It is the power of this forgiveness that gives freedom from our sins and from the past. The woman who received this forgiveness made a decision to follow Jesus.

She had two reasons to do this. First, the forgiveness that was offered unconditionally freed her to make such a decision. Second, having received such love and forgiveness from this rabbi, she wanted to be a part of his life. There are really only two things that all disciples share in common. We are all sinners who have received Christ's forgiveness. We have the spirit of Jesus living in us, having received him as Savior and Lord of our life. Our life with our fellow disciples could be much more at peace and harmony if we all remembered these simple truths.

R&D *In what way are you aware of the depths of Christ's forgiveness given to you?*

Prayer: *You sacrificed yourself upon a cross to free us from sin and bring us into relationship with the Father, Lord Jesus. What more could anyone ask?*

Read: Matthew 5:1-10

The Sermon on the Mount

One of the major themes of the Gospel of Matthew is discipleship. The fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters are specific teachings on discipleship. For the next several days we will be looking at these teachings. They touch on the basic disciplines of the followers of Jesus.

“His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.” The scene here is one in which Jesus is teaching the disciples with the crowd listening in. It is important to remember that the Sermon on the Mount was intended for followers, not for a crowd.

The sermon begins with the beatitudes. In these Jesus promises a series of blessings to those who follow him. The spiritually poor will inherit the kingdom of heaven. Those who mourn will be comforted. The humble will inherit the earth. Those who thirst for God’s righteousness will be filled. The merciful will receive mercy. The pure in heart will see God. Peacemakers will be called the children of God. Those persecuted will receive strength.

Often these sayings are viewed outside the realm of discipleship. Yet these are not promised to just anyone, but rather to those who have decided to follow Jesus. In the context of discipleship, these promises come to fulfillment. For example, Christians face mourning like anyone else. Yet when we mourn we have a “very real presence in times of trouble.” We know that our loss is never the end, but rather Jesus is the end. Those who walk with him have this comfort.

R&D How have you found the promises of the beatitudes true for yourself?

Prayer: Blessed are you, Lord Jesus, for giving us guidelines for life in you.

And behold, a leper came to him and knelt before him, saying "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean." Matthew 8:2

As I began to read the New Testament accounts, I saw that Christ almost never "went out of his way" to help anyone. He seems to have walked along and helped the people in his path. He was totally focused on doing God's will and going where God led him. But he never failed to help people he met along the way while going where God directed him. This made for an amazing steadiness and spiritual economy in his direction and ministry. This one change in my perspective made witnessing not a program but a way of life.

Monday, December 12

Read: Matthew 5:11

The Promise of Persecution

The promises of the beatitudes end with the awesome recognition that persecution often follows disciples of Jesus. This recognition should give us sobering thought.

One theologian has suggested that the measurement of our commitment is actually the rejection and hatred we face because of our belief in Jesus. If this is so, am I really following?

A young woman I know was totally rejected by her family for becoming a believer in Jesus. A young man in his twenties was rejected by his fiancé's family when they found that he was a believer. They considered him a fanatic. A successful executive who was a member of my parish was shunned for a promotion because his beliefs as a Christian were in tension with his boss' objectives.

We often think of persecution as something that ancient martyrs and long-distant missionaries face, but not us. Even in a society with great freedom such as ours, this is not true. Jesus did not want his followers to be naive. Disciples should know that giving God's kingdom ultimate priority in our lives will not make us popular with either the world or Satan.

R&D To what extent are you prepared for the cost of discipleship, even if it is rejection and hatred?

Prayer: *Prepare us, Dear Jesus, to face whatever may be ahead of us as we follow you.*

Tuesday, December 13

Read: Matthew 5:43-48

Love Our Enemies

Yesterday we saw that Jesus taught that his disciples would face rejection. Today we contrast this with his teaching on loving our enemies.

As a disciple, I must face the fact that I have enemies. Yet, as a disciple, I am to have no enemies. I am to love those who hate and reject me. Our example in this, of course, is Jesus himself who prayed that his Father would forgive even those who put him to death.

The promise that we have is that God's love can overcome any enemy. It has the power to turn around the worst that can be thrown at us to accomplish God's end. The apostle to the Gentiles, Paul, started as one who hated and persecuted the followers of the Way.

There is a further truth to this. Early in our journey with Christ it is tempting to see others, especially nominal church members, as the enemy. True followers of Christ, however, have no enemies. We cannot allow ourselves the luxury of hatred and dislike of others. We must remember that today's perceived enemy may be tomorrow's brother or sister in Christ. How do we find the strength to love others in this way? We find it in the closeness of our journey with Jesus. Close to him, we find hatred hard. Near him we find strength to love the unlovable.

R&D *Give an example of forgiving someone who hated or rejected you.*

Prayer: *The best way for us to love others, Lord Christ, is for you to love them through us.*

Read: Matthew 5:13-16

Salt and Light

The disciples of Jesus were called to a special mission. They were to be something unique in this world. Two images of this uniqueness that Jesus used in the Sermon on the Mount were those of salt and light.

From a human perspective, we believe that the important people are those who are the movers and shakers of the world. We look to the superstars in politics, education, and even the entertainment world as the real trend setters. Yet, today's lesson tells us that things are very different from God's perspective.

Nothing illustrates this better during the season of Advent than that of the holy family. Mary and Joseph were common people. At the time of the birth of Jesus, it was Herod, Quirinius, and Caesar who were seen as the real powerbrokers. Yet, a humble couple responded to God's call and they are the people who we know really mattered.

Jesus taught his disciples that they were the real people of the world. They were the salt and the light. On them rested the future of humanity, of human destiny. A Christian couple raising their children, Christian businesspeople demonstrating honesty and integrity, a Christian single refusing to accept the standards of the world—these are the people who really matter!

R&D In what ways are you living out being salt and light in your world?

Prayer: In a time when there are so many distractions in life, help us to keep our focus on what matters to you, Lord Christ.

Thursday, December 15

Read: Matthew 5:17-20

Disciples and the Word

Today, we begin to look in the Sermon on the Mount at the ways Jesus taught that his disciples were to carry out the disciplines of discipleship. For the next several days we will be looking

at these. Our relationship to Jesus is nurtured through basic things that we do. If we ignore these, our relationship to him suffers.

Jesus taught that he had come to fulfill the law and the prophets. Jesus had a high regard for the place of God's written word. He taught his disciples to have this regard also.

It is popular in mainline churches to make fun of or ridicule so-called "fundamentalists." Some church leaders also use the word "Biblicist" as a pejorative term. They fear a rigid kind of biblical literalism. Yet, what is the alternative they offer? Are we to treat God's Word written as simply one insightful book in looking at life's options?

The cure for the distorted use of Scripture is not to give Scripture little regard; it is just the opposite. It is to give the daily reading and reflection on Scripture a central part in our discipline as a follower of Christ. The character, nature, and plan of God is revealed in Scripture. Jesus is presented and proclaimed through the pages of Scripture. It is in the words of Scripture that the transformation of our world begins.

R&D In what ways are God's words becoming a consistent part of your world?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord God, that in our day we have access to Scripture we can read and understand and commentaries such as this one that can further enlighten us.

Friday, December 16

Read: Matthew 5:21-30

Matters of the Heart

Murder and adultery, hatred and lust, these Jesus taught his disciples are matters of the heart. Most of our actions are born out of our desires.

I once met a psychologist who criticized Jesus' teachings on these subjects. He said that it was better for people to think the thoughts, but not act on them. For example, pornography helped people keep from acting out sexually, he contended. Christians had it wrong; we should measure only the effects of behavior on other people. He contended that this was the only measure for morality.

Of course, in one sense he was right. He was right that when a person murders another, the consequences to the other are more serious than when a person only thinks hateful thoughts.

Yet, we know that this position is too simple. Jesus knew that it was from the heart, the center of desire, that evil comes. He dealt with his disciples by pointing to their inner lives first. Most especially, we should see that Jesus had the soul of the person, not its effects on others, as the subject in this lesson.

He knew that hidden thoughts of hatred and lust are like emotional and spiritual cancers that can erode our spiritual lives. He knew that outward purity would flow from inner holiness. As disciples we are to have the desire for inner holiness.

R&D *Is being holy a growing desire in your journey with Jesus?*

Prayer: *We want you in our heart of hearts, Lord Christ, where your Holy Spirit dwells to guide us on the path you have set before us as your disciples.*

Saturday, December 17

Read: Matthew 5:33-42

Simplicity of Life

Today's lesson on discipleship points to the value of simplicity. In the first example that Jesus gives involving oaths, he charges his disciples to learn the value of straight talk.

The second example deals with motivation. Even our motivations are to have a simple core: the desire to do good for others. This means the giving up of the old nature of demanding retribution and vengeance. Our motives and words are to be rooted in simplicity and straight-forwardness.

An astounding thing about the apostle Paul was the number of times that he could say, "My conscience is clear." As a disciple of Jesus, he had learned the value of examining his motivation. When his integrity was challenged, he did not have to become too introspective. He knew why he did the things he did.

A dear friend of mine told me once that he had learned the value of "keeping short accounts" with God and with other people. "If I do something wrong, I try to deal with it immediately." My

friend taught me the value of keeping a simple and straightforward life.

R&D *To what extent are you keeping track of your motives, especially in relationship with others?*

Prayer: *Lord God, the joy of this life in Christ motivates me to keep short accounts with You so that I don't allow myself to wander off track.*

Sunday, December 18

Sabbath Time

Holding the form of religion but denying the power of it. 2 Timothy 3:5

During my first four years as an active adult churchman, I had taught two Sunday School classes, served on numerous committees and on the vestries of two churches. These were fine churches, filled with good, substantial people. But one of the constant sources of frustration was that in Sunday School classes, teachers' meetings, committee meetings, and even vestry meetings in the church, there was an amazing lack of basic honesty. It wasn't so much that people lied. We just had an unspoken agreement not to press the truth—when it seemed that the truth might have hurt the leaders or someone else's feelings—or really rock the boat. We evidently felt that being honest in such cases would be cruel or tactless. Consequently, we lived in a world of subtle duplicity of which we Christians were the contributing cause.

Monday, December 19

Read: Matthew 6:1-4

Giving

Over the next four days, we will look at three key disciplines: giving, praying, and fasting. In looking at these, we should note that Jesus uses an important phrase to introduce each topic, "When you...." Jesus does not begin by saying, "If you...." In today's reading, he says "When you give...." The operating assumption here is that giving (as well as praying and fasting) is a normal part of discipleship.

Jesus contrasts a disciple's giving with that of "the hypocrites" who give as a show before other people. True giving to the

needy should be done secretly, as though the left hand would not know what the right hand is doing.

This lesson teaches us at least one important principle. True giving to the needy, as opposed to the hypocritical kind, is based on concern for the needy, not on what recognition we get from it.

When I worked as a chaplain in a children's hospital, I would watch the troop of celebrities who would come through at Christmas time. While the cameras were rolling, these folks presented themselves as generous, caring, and concerned people. Since I never saw any of these people the other eleven months of the year, I grew callous to their staged compassion. Most painful was that the children could see right through this hypocrisy.

Second, people who do such things receive, as Jesus taught, "their reward." They do not receive God's reward. We know that someday the hearts (motivations) of all people will be revealed.

R&D In what ways are you practicing a Christlike discipline of giving to the needy?

Prayer: Lord God, all we have is from Your hand. Thank You for letting us share it with others in need.

Tuesday, December 20

Read: Matthew 6:5-8

Prayer

Again, we see "when you pray," not "if you pray." Presuming that his disciples would be regular in prayer, Jesus now gives the same warning he had offered on giving. Prayer is not to be done for outward show, but secretly, quietly, directed to God.

I once took a whole semester class on the subject of prayer. The professor, a scholar and monk, defined prayer in this way: "Prayer is engagement with life and encounter with ultimate reality."

Working with the above definition, we spent three months exploring every intellectual avenue in understanding prayer. One thing we did not do. We did not pray.

It was as though we had spent an entire semester studying love poetry but had never read a poem. No wonder that many of my fellow classmates and I found the class a complete frustration.

Yet often we Christians approach prayer in the same way. We think that prayer is something that must first be intellectually understood before we can do it. Actually, prayer must be done to understand it intellectually. So where do we go to begin? I have found it best to go to a person who prays—whose prayer life speaks to me. As a priest, I learned my first and best lessons in prayer from a construction worker. As I got with him for prayer, I learned how to open my heart, every aspect of it, to God.

R&D *How have you learned to develop your vital life of prayer?*

Prayer: *Lord, teach us to pray.*

Wednesday, December 21

Read: Matthew 6:9-15

“Our Father”

As an example of how to pray, Jesus now teaches his disciples the Lord’s Prayer. For the sake of our study in discipleship, we should note three things. First, obviously, this is not the Lord’s prayer at all, but the disciple’s prayer. Each clause of this prayer speaks to the ongoing needs of a disciple. Volumes have been written on this prayer. Some scholars believe this was intended as a liturgical prayer, almost complete in the form we now have it. Other scholars believe this is an outline of how to pray that has become over the years a liturgical prayer. In either case, it survives because it so directly conveys the hearts of those who truly desire to be a disciple.

Second, the prayer is purposefully intimate. It begins, “Our Father.” I once asked a group of children during a children’s sermon, “What is prayer?” One five-year-old girl responded, “That’s easy! Prayer is talking with God.” “Do you talk with God?” I gently asked. “Sometimes,” she replied, “mainly I listen.” What a refreshing insight from this child. She had Jesus’ main ingredient for prayer, intimacy with God.

Third, this passage ends with a stern warning about the importance of forgiveness. A truly prayerful heart is first a penitent heart. We approach prayer with the Father with a serious recognition of His forgiveness. This attitude is to spill out into every other relationship we have.

R&D *What is your regular discipline of creating intimacy with God in prayer?*

Prayer: *Lord God, we thank You that You are an accessible God, at least as desirous of Your contact with us as we are with You.*

Thursday, December 22

Read: Matthew 6:16-18

Fasting

“When you fast,” Jesus now says. In this passage fasting is treated equally with prayer and giving. I believe it safe to say that few of us treat it as equally important as the other two topics.

Yet, Jesus again does not say, “If we fast.” He seems to presume that fasting would be an important part of the disciple’s life. On one occasion, when the disciples were unsuccessful in casting out a demon, Jesus pointed out that more “prayer and fasting” were needed.

A most helpful book on this subject is Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline*. This book contains an excellent overview of the place of fasting in the life of a Christian as well as practical guidelines on how to get started.

The best reminder of the importance of this discipline is that Jesus began his ministry with a forty-day fast. Apparently from this story we learn that fasting brought Jesus through a time of testing to a clear recognition of his calling.

Why does fasting seem such a key to deeper spiritual power? Part of the answer probably lies in our constant need for food. The decision to abstain from food for some set period is a clear reminder that human beings do not live “by bread alone.”

R&D *What role does fasting have in your discipleship?*

Prayer: *Lord, I'm reminded that, when fasting from food is not available to us for health reasons, we can fast from other things as well, denying ourselves in other ways to bring us closer to You.*

Friday, December 23

Read: Matthew 7:24-29

Build on a Rock

The Sermon on the Mount, which we have seen as teachings on discipleship, ends with the analogy of building on a rock as opposed to building on sand. Jesus introduces this summary with the words, “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice...” Many scholars believe that this last teaching is the summary of Matthew, chapters 5, 6, and 7. How are we to build on such a rock?

First, we need to see that being a disciple involves an intentional discipline. Too often being a Christian comes to mean “when I get around to thinking about it.” If we are honest about it, we would have to admit that the Christian Church is filled with many baptized Christians, fewer believing Christians, and very few practicing disciples. Yet we have also seen that the power for discipleship comes through this intentional life.

G. K. Chesterton once said, “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting, it has been found hard and therefore not tried.” No discipline is easy. What do the disciplines we have studied do for us?

Being an intentional disciple brings us into greater and greater intimacy with Jesus and his ways. This leads us into a deeper knowledge and love of the Father. The disciplines of the Christian life are not works that give us special privilege before God; they are acts to bring us into deeper relationship with God.

Intimacy with Jesus and the Father is the key ingredient of the Christian life. It is the true mark of growth as a disciple. How about us? At this point in our study of discipleship, how are we growing in intimacy with God?

R&D *What are the disciplines that have led you more closely in intimacy with God?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, what we love to do, we do. May we better show our love for you by a discipline of discipleship.*

Saturday, December 24

Read: Matthew 9:35—10:1

Walking as Jesus Walked

In our last series of lessons on discipleship, we will use the analogy of “walking” as an example of discipleship. After all, the disciples were invited to “follow” Jesus. This meant that they actually followed him day by day, learning of him and from him.

Today’s lesson asks us to look at walking with the compassion Jesus had. “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

In this context Jesus invites the disciples to prayer because the workers are few. This passage is quoted often, but few note what Jesus does next. He called the twelve to himself, gave them authority and sent them out! He sent them out to minister as he had ministered in his compassion for the lost.

There is a story that when Jesus arrived in heaven after his resurrection an angel asked him how his message was to be taken to the ends of the earth. “I have left my disciples,” Jesus replies. The angel is struck that Jesus has left such an important task in the hands of sinful people. “What is your alternate plan?” the angel asks. “I have no alternate plan!” the Lord replied. “Either they will go in my name or they won’t.”

There is no one else to walk this earth like Jesus except those whom he has called to himself, his disciples. The great news is that he has given us the authority and power to do this.

R&D In what ways have you felt Jesus’ authority and power to minister his compassion?

Prayer: *Embolden us, Lord Christ, to take your message to a very needful world facing needs that can only be met in your name.*

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord. Deuteronomy 6:4

I have become convinced that the things which keep us from a live relationship to Christ are often not the “bad” things in our lives, but the good things which capture our imaginations and keep us from focusing on Jesus Christ. I think this accounts for a good bit of the frustration of churchmen. We look around in our lives and say, “No stealing, no murder, no adultery! Why, God, am I so miserable and frustrated in my Christian life?” But we have not seen the fact that we have never really offered to Him the one thing He requires—our primary love.

Monday, December 26

Read: Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Thoughts

There is a loveliness about the story of Christ’s nativity which time does not dim. Yet also, there is a realism for which we cannot have too big a place in our minds as we read. It is “in the bleak mid-winter” of tired, angry earth that the Christ is born. Carelessness and strife are the setting—Augustus far away issuing a decree and men moving to his bidding; Bethlehem filled with a bitter, clamorous crowd. Because Jesus Christ is the answer to man’s real, appalling need, he was born in the midst of it. In the stable, not upon the imperial throne, is a Savior, and peace.

The circumstances of the birth of Jesus defy all that the world would have expected of the coming of a Savior. God came in a baby! The King of kings was born in the humblest of circumstances and was cradled in a manger. The birth of the Savior was at first noticed only by humble people, like the shepherds, and by heaven.

Lowliness, openness to God’s will and directions, dependence on God are writ large on the shepherds’ faces as they watch. And they are not disappointed; for to them, and not to the great rulers of the earth like Augustus is God’s good news of the birth of the Savior given. This news is good news and joy for all the people only if they have the same dispositions as the shepherds.

That there was no room in the inn was symbolic of what was to happen to Jesus. The only place where there was room for him was on a cross. He sought an entry to the over-crowded hearts of men; he could not find it; and still his search—and his rejection—go on. (William Barclay)

R&D *Will this Christmas Season, for you, be a rebirth of commitment to discipleship?*

Prayer: *We pray fervently, Lord Christ, for peace on the earth and good will to all in your name.*

Tuesday, December 27

Read: John 6:60-69

Facing Disillusionment

In our daily walk with Jesus, we will constantly face failure and disappointment. Often this leads us to disillusionment. We need to be honest about this aspect of the Christian life. It does no one good to pretend that being a disciple is always a mountaintop experience. How are we to deal with this failure and disappointment?

First, we need to remember that our failures at the disciplines of the Christian life do not remove us from God's grace. God through Jesus has already decided to love us, even die for us. The disciplines of this life are intended to bring us into deeper relationship with Jesus and the Father. When we fail, we are hurt, but our relationship with Jesus, which is based on his love for us, is not hurt.

Second, we need to remember that in this world failure is often the best teacher. Think of the child learning to walk or to talk. This child learns by constant and repetitive failure. Like a spiritual child, it is from failures that Jesus teaches us.

Third, we need to remember that disappointment often comes when we expect the wrong things. Often, we are tempted to give up. Today's lesson teaches us that the original disciples faced disillusionment. This is just as much a part of the Christian life as spiritual success.

When faced with times like these, perhaps the best we can admit is “Where else would we go?” In times like these we are faced often with accepting Jesus’ lordship over us whether it works the way we want it to or not.

R&D *When were the times when you felt most disappointed with God?*

Prayer: *Help us, Lord, not to give up even when the path ahead is unclear to us.*

Wednesday, December 28

Read: Mark 8:31-38

Walking the Way of the Cross

To follow Jesus also means to face a cross as he faced one. Today’s lesson shows clearly that we, as disciples, are to die to ourselves, to take up our cross—self-denial—and to follow him.

When the original disciples followed Jesus, they found that the road led to Calvary, to a cross. They walked with him, but they also resisted him. Jesus saw the way of self-denial as the way his Father had put before him. He saw it as his disciples’ way also.

As we follow Jesus, we will find that there are many hopes, dreams, aspirations and desires that must die. These are not based on the Father’s will for us, but on selfishness, and self-centeredness. The way of Jesus puts these to death.

It has become fashionable in some Christian circles to portray the Christian life as one of rewards. If we profess Jesus and follow him, we are told that he will bless us with riches and rewards. While there are many tangible blessings promised to believers, these are not the rewards of discipleship. The reward of discipleship is to become like Jesus, to share with him in life with the Father. There is only one place to find our finishing school as Christians: it is the cross. “No cross, no crown!”

R&D *To what extent are you willing to allow Jesus to show you what needs to die in your life?*

Prayer: *The crosses we face in life are as nothing compared to the one you faced for us, Lord Jesus, and we are grateful.*

Read: John 20:19-23

Resurrected Life

To walk with Jesus also means to walk in the power of the resurrection. When Jesus breathed on his disciples, it was a reenactment of God breathing the breath of life into Adam. This time it was Jesus giving to his disciples the breath of the resurrected life.

This life meant the forgiveness of their sins and the power to live a new life. It is a fact that the most consistent proof of the resurrected life of Jesus is the transformed life of his disciples.

The gospels are so honest about the disciples, their inability to understand Jesus' mission, their slowness to believe, their self-centeredness, that their change remains one of the greatest miracles of the New Testament.

What could have caused such a change? Clearly it is only the resurrection itself. And the resurrection of Jesus was not something that they merely witnessed. It was something that transformed them. This band of disbelieving, fearful, and cowardly people became an army that upset their whole world.

This resurrected life goes on too as others receive this forgiveness. The disciples shared this new life with everyone they met. One of my early Bible teachers was a man who had been a drug addict in New York City for over twenty years. One day he was introduced to Jesus by a disciple. In one moment of prayer, he experienced a complete personality transformation. It was as though new life had been breathed into him.

R&D How have you most experienced the new life in Christ as a transforming power in your life?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you sent your Holy Spirit into the lives of the early disciples and you do the same for us today, empowering us to serve those around us as you did when you were physically on earth.

Friday, December 30

Read: Acts 1:4-8

The Power to Witness

In our journey with Jesus, we also must walk as he walked “in the power of the Holy Spirit.” This is the promise that he made to his disciples. He promised that they would receive the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

The result of this empowerment was that they would do the ministry he had done. They would share with him in the messianic ministry of Isaiah 61:1-3.

They would become his witnesses. They would witness in his power. So Jesus’ disciples became by the power of the Holy Spirit his witnesses.

Truly this is what our journey with Jesus is to produce. We are to move from disciples to witnesses. The fruit of the disciplined life in Christ is effective witness to others. This witness is to be carried out by word and deed, by proclamation and acts of love.

No study of discipleship would be complete without realizing that disciples are made for ministry to the world.

R&D In what ways have you been a witness for Christ in this past week?

Prayer: By the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit within us, Lord Christ, there is nothing on earth that can keep us from witnessing to your love.

Saturday, December 31

Read: Matthew 28:16-20

Make Disciples

We end our journey with Jesus with the words of the Great Commission. In doing so we should note three things.

First, we recognize again that Jesus has given authority to his disciples. We have been given authority. Second, we see that we are sent. “Go,” Jesus says. But where are we to go? To the broken world, is the answer. We are people sent to our world to witness to Jesus Christ and his redeeming love. We are people on a mission. Third, we are to make disciples. As a parish priest, I often wondered

how I would know if I were doing my job? What signs would I see in the congregation's life, what signs in individuals who were under my leadership? I finally came to realize that I would know we were about the Lord's work when the disciples committed to me made other disciples. At first this was discouraging; very little of our congregation's life focused on such work. Yet, having perceived what the end was to be, I and others set out to do it. We set out to teach others so that they could literally reproduce themselves.

Christians who commit themselves to this work are given a great promise: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." We have Jesus with us to do his work. We can have confidence that Jesus is in the business of making disciples and that we are a part of this plan.

R&D How have you reproduced yourself as a disciple of Jesus?

Prayer: Lord, make me a go-forth type of disciple that I may do my share of making disciples for you!

Reflections