

The Journey

GOD'S WORD FOR DAILY LIVING



SEPTEMBER-DECEMBER 2023



Bible Reading Fellowship

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

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

Amen

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

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

The following features make *The Journey* unique:

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

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

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

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Luke

Chapters 19-24

Friday, September 1

Read: Luke 19:1-10

Zacchaeus

The story of Zacchaeus is the favorite of many Christians. There is a freshness to the episode that makes it especially appealing. It not only tells us a lot about Jesus and about human nature, but there is a special message in it for us all.

Zacchaeus was obviously very interested in Jesus. Why else would a person in his position climb a tree to see Jesus passing by? The eagerness of Zacchaeus' response to Jesus' words to him also indicates that more than idle curiosity was involved.

We will never know whether it was some spiritual perception, some foreknowledge of or about Zacchaeus, or just the sight of the tiny figure perched in the tree that drew Jesus' attention. In any event, Jesus spoke first, calling Zacchaeus by name and making an arrangement that Zacchaeus would never have dared suggest himself. Zacchaeus had taken the first step; Jesus was quick to meet him more than halfway. All that was needed to bring Zacchaeus to repentance and the beginning of a new life was the graciousness of Jesus in showing friendship. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem; he would never pass this way again. For Zacchaeus it was now or never.

How many are there out there in our own neighborhood, in our workplace, among our social gatherings who are "up a tree"? Studies show that a substantial majority of people living in the United States believe in God, but only a minority are in church on a Sunday morning. Sensitivity to the needs of others is of primary importance to those who would do the work of evangelism and service. The ability to recognize the unspoken appeal, to see beneath the surface, to sense the feeling behind the words—these

are the ways in which God would have us be sensitive to those around us.

R&D *What “Zacchaeus” is God calling you to show sensitivity toward?*

Prayer: *Make us ever mindful of the needs of others, Lord; and the greatest need is to be in relationship with You.*

Saturday, September 2

Read: Luke 19:11-27

Resources

Bible scholars believe that the confusing aspects of this parable may result from two stories having been woven together. Portions of it parallel the parable of the talents as told in Matthew 25:14-30. What leads into it is speculation that the kingdom of God (here understood to mean the end of the world) was imminent. Luke is attempting to discourage belief that the kingdom would come fully in the near future by placing the story in response to that speculation.

What Jesus is clearly saying in the parable is that the important thing is for the servants of God to use whatever resources they have to the best of their ability to serve Him. The failure to develop their gifts for ministry will cause them to atrophy, whereas their use will cause them to multiply. Mother Teresa, when asked how she could possibly supervise a worldwide ministry of caring for the dying, supposedly said, “I just do what I can, where I am, with what I have.”

There are always people, in the church and particularly in the sects, who believe that the end of the world is just around the corner. Obscure passages in Daniel and Revelation can easily be misinterpreted to show parallels with current events. Such speculation is a waste of time that could be spent doing Christ’s work here and now.

R&D *What talents have you used or failed to use in God’s service?*

Prayer: *Help us, Lord, to bloom where we are planted.*

For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Ephesians 6:12

The only real victories are spiritual victories. The only real defeats are spiritual defeats. However much things may appear to be won or lost on the material or physical plane, it is the spiritual sphere behind the outward appearances that is the sphere of reality. Prophets and saints have always known this.

Monday, September 4

Read: Exodus 34:2-27

Labor Day

“A mighty fortress is our God,” wrote Martin Luther. When adversity discourages or threatens us, we seek refuge in our god. Our god isn’t always the Lord, though. We often rely exclusively on human beings, substances or behaviors to sustain us. We resort to habits which damage our relationships with God, others, and ourselves.

The habits of Israel included worshiping fertility gods. They paid homage to the golden calf and forgot the Lord who freed them. In today’s lesson, the living God reminds them of His love. He will forgive their sin and keep His promises. The Lord also reiterates that wrongdoing has consequences. He renews His covenant with His wayward people and forbids their dependence on lifeless gods.

We cling to destructive habits, but the living God persists. He continually calls us to forsake counterproductive behaviors which absorb our attention and energy, hindering healthy relationships. He will sustain us with His steadfast love.

Jocelyn McWhirter Zug

R&D *For whom do you labor this Labor Day?*

Prayer: *When our lives are devoted to you, Lord Jesus, our labor is devoted as well.*

Tuesday, September 5

Read: Luke 19:28-40

Triumphant Entry

The event toward which the narrative has been moving now occurs. This is the climax of the long journey, and the beginning of the final act in the most crucial drama the world has ever known.

Jesus' action was a direct acting out of the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9-10, wherein a king would ride into Jerusalem, not in a chariot or on a warhorse, but on a donkey. This would demonstrate that his authority rested on his ability to maintain peace rather than on military power. However, the role he had adopted ran contrary to the popular expectation. He was not to conform to the current messianic hopes nor the enthusiasm of the Zealots. In reality, the Roman authorities had no reason to fear him.

Yet, he was a king. He entered Jerusalem with regal dignity against a backdrop of the sure knowledge of what lay ahead of him. Much of the poignancy of the passion story stems from the irony of the unrecognized kingship of Jesus (23:1-12; 37-38). The greeting of Jesus' followers comes from Psalm 118:26, but Luke has inserted the word "king" to leave no doubt about Jesus' true identity.

We know that what looked so triumphant in this passage of Scripture soon turns sour. The enthusiasm of the crowd turns against Jesus when he allows himself to be taken, defenseless, by his opponents. The humility and pacifism which were acted out in the entry looked different when the real thing happened.

R&D *Was Jesus a pacifist? Explain.*

Prayer: *May we remember, Lord, that humility does not come so much from thinking less about ourselves but thinking about ourselves less.*

Wednesday, September 6

Read: Luke 19:41—20:8

Deep Feelings

As Jesus wept over Jerusalem, we, too, can weep over things that we know would work out differently if only the people concerned would follow the Lord's way instead of their own selfish or deluded course. We can see destruction ahead and can do nothing

about it. Jesus knew this about Jerusalem and he knew it about his fellow Jews, and he also knew the price that he was about to pay to let the world know the extent of God's love.

The strong emotions which Jesus was feeling are next manifested by the confrontation with those who were commercializing the temple. For the people to make animal sacrifices in the temple in accordance with the law, being able to purchase them was undoubtedly a convenience and not entirely inappropriate. The problem was that those who sold there charged unfair prices, thus making them no better than "robbers" in the house of God.

We can be sure that, as Jesus taught daily in the temple, he was conveying to the people the essentials of the faith. It is no surprise that strong feelings on the part of the religious establishment resulted. They began trying to trap him. Jesus is challenged to reveal his authority. As usual, he bounces the question back with a counterquestion which puts his antagonists on the spot. They don't want to say anything negative about John the Baptist because they feared the people, so they express ignorance. The duplicity they exhibit in this situation is a foretaste of what is to come. Jesus calls them (and us) to a decision; how a person decides reveals itself in the action he takes.

R&D What double-mindedness on your part does Jesus want you to deal with today?

Prayer: Loving God, You have a path for each of us to follow; help us not to stray.

Thursday, September 7

Read: Luke 20:9-19

Cornerstone

Jesus continued challenging the religious leaders, this time by way of a parable aimed directly at them (v.19). In a land dominated by an occupying army, as Palestine was at the time, the idea of a landlord who was abroad was not far-fetched. The tenants might be tempted to withhold a portion of the produce they paid in rent, and this could even lead them to violence. If the vineyard

became unclaimed property through the death of the heir, the tenants who possessed it would have a claim to ownership.

Any perceptive listener would immediately identify the vineyard as Israel (see Isaiah 5:1-7), and therefore themselves as the tenants responsible for caring for the land. Their forebears had rejected the servants (prophets) whom the owner (God) had sent, and now they were scheming to do away with the heir, the most notable representative that ever had been sent. In doing so they would abrogate their authority, and spiritual leadership would pass to people of inferior position but superior insight.

That is the heart of the parable. Those who by their lack of perception and misuse of power have shown themselves incapable of carrying out the responsibilities entrusted to them will be replaced. The stone (see Psalm 118:22-23; Isaiah 8:14-15; 1 Peter 2:4-8) they have rejected will become the cornerstone on which the Christian faith will be built.

R&D Are there parallels between what was happening at the time of this parable and leadership problems in churches today? Explain.

Prayer: Lord, may we always be faithful tenants of all You entrust to us.

Friday, September 8

Read: Luke 20:20-26

Render to Caesar

Once again there is the attempt at entrapment. The Roman government levied an annual tax on every adult male. It was deeply resented by the people because it evidenced their subjugation by Rome. No one would want to be in the position of having to express a public opinion about the propriety of the tax. Such matters went best unsaid; people kept their opinions to themselves, but, in practice, they paid.

It seemed to be the perfect setup to trap Jesus. The spies sent to do the dirty deed begin by flattering Jesus in an attempt to catch him off guard. If he answered the question in the affirmative, it would discredit him in the eyes of the people who would regard him as a collaborator. If he answered in the negative he would be

guilty of treason, and the Roman government would have cause to take action against him.

Once again Jesus outsmarts them, and they are left with an empty snare. Nor does Jesus' reply offer definitive guidance for us on the issue of Christian obedience to the government. But it does lay down a basic approach. The state has authority which ultimately derives from God. To accept the benefits of Roman administration without paying the tax would be wrong; but there is an overriding loyalty to God. The government is to be supported in its task of preserving law and order (Romans 13:1-7). Only when it becomes totalitarian and claims a loyalty which belongs to God is the Christian entitled to resist.

R&D What instances of passive resistance, civil disobedience, and so forth, in our day do you believe justified, unjustified?

Prayer: Guide us, Lord, in how to respond when we are unhappy with the government's actions from time to time.

Saturday, September 9

Read: Luke 20:27-40

More Testing

Now the Sadducees come forward to test Jesus. They wanted to show the absurdity of belief in the resurrection of the dead, so they proposed a hypothetical question to try to ridicule Jesus. It was based on Deuteronomy 25:5-6, to protect the continuity of each family and the decentralized control of land through family ownership which was basic to the Mosaic economy. At the time of Jesus, this law was no longer observed.

On the surface, the Sadducees had a valid point. A series of relationships that would be quite manageable consecutively would indeed present some problems if undertaken concurrently. The error the Sadducees made was to assume that life in heaven would be subject to the same limitations as life here on earth. Jesus contradicted this. Perhaps the deep relationship which we are capable of sustaining with only a few people in this life will be expanded to include others in the life to come.

Jesus' illustration of the fact of life after death was based on a text from the books of Moses, which were the only Scriptures the Sadducees recognized as authoritative. In a typical rabbinic sort of argument, he seems either to have won them over (v.39) or shut them up (v.40). In our day we may be frustrated by arguments which were understood by those with whom they were discussed but make little or no sense to us. It is important to note that Jesus met people where they were, in their own language, on their own ground. We will be far better witnesses for Christ as we learn better how to do the same thing.

R&D What do you think will be our relationship with our loved ones in heaven, and how do you feel about that?

Prayer: There are many things we will not know until we are personally present with you, Lord Jesus, but we are eternally grateful that that day will come.

Sunday, September 10

Sabbath Time

“And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” Acts 4:12

If people give up their religion because someone forgets them or slights them, it is shown that their real treasure is in being thought of and considered, and not in Jesus only.

Monday, September 11

Read: Luke 20:41—21:4

Beware!

Our lesson for today begins, as our last one ended, with what, to us in this day, might be passed off as simply an intramural argument that has little relevance to us. Jesus was not denying Davidic descent as a part of the qualification of the Messiah. He was simply saying that “Son of David” is not an adequate description of the Messiah. David, who was believed to have written Psalm 110, had called the Messiah his Lord; therefore, the Messiah must be superior to David.

What does speak clearly to us are the two brief teachings which follow, connected only by the fact that they both make reference to widows.

The first (vv.45-47) tells us yet more about prayer. It is not how long you pray, but the attitude of your heart in praying. It is too easy to fall into the trap of “being religious” in the sense of grudgingly obeying all the commandments at the cost of *the* commandment to love God with our everything, and our neighbor as ourselves (worse still: showing off in doing it).

The second (vv.1-4) tells us that it is not how much we give to the Lord’s work that counts, but the proportion that what we give bears to what we have. It is easy for most of us to give out of our abundance; it is more difficult to give sacrificially. One is reminded of the story of the man who decided to tithe when he had a relatively comfortable income, but then came to his priest one day with a dilemma. By the grace of God, he had suddenly become very wealthy. It was easy enough for him to give \$5,000 a year when he was making \$50,000; but what was he to do now that he was making \$500,000? Of course, he was now in a position to do much more than tithe; but the priest handled him more kindly than to suggest that. Instead he said, “If you are uncomfortable in giving \$50,000 per year to the Lord’s work, I’m sure he would be willing for you to go back to what you were making before.”

R&D *How do you feel about tithing?*

Prayer: *We display a loving and generous heart, Lord, when we are increasingly grateful for the amount of our income we are able to share with others in need.*

Tuesday, September 12

Read: Luke 21:5-19

Words and Thoughts

There was, in Jesus’ time, great fascination with the end of the world, and much speculation about when it would happen. Two crises are mentioned by Jesus in this passage: the destruction of Jerusalem and the end of all things. We have already seen that Luke mixes historical and eschatological material. Here he draws a

distinction between the historical destruction of Jerusalem and the eschatological end of the world.

Jerusalem will certainly be destroyed (as it was in A.D. 70), and there will be a great upheaval. Some will see this as an indication that the end of the world is about to happen, but Jesus' followers are not to be led astray (vv.8-9). A period of further crisis (vv.10-19) must still occur, during which the disciples will suffer persecution.

The important part of the message for us has to do with how we, as followers of Christ, are to face persecution and other challenges. Certainly, in the years since Christ's physical presence on earth, Christians have faced persecution. They do in many parts of the world today. But all of us, if we are true to our faith, continually face challenges to that faith. "Surely you don't take the Bible seriously." "If it feels good, why not do it?" "The one who dies with the most toys wins." What do we say when we are faced with such statements? Jesus tells us that we will be given the words and thoughts we need in order to deal with them (v.15).

R&D *When have you experienced guidance from the Holy Spirit in responding to an ungodly situation?*

Prayer: *Thank you, Holy Spirit, for living within us.*

Wednesday, September 13

Read: Luke 21:20-38

Be Watchful

Jesus' teaching continues with a description of the distress that will accompany the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman army. Again, there is the distinction between what is going to happen to Jerusalem and the end of all things. There is to be an unspecified period (the times of the Gentiles, v.24) separating the two events. Then will follow a new period of distress, involving disruption of the forces of nature, which will be the immediate prelude to the coming of the Son of Man in glory.

No one knows when the end of the world will come. It could be today or tomorrow. Most people, including Christians, think it will be some time in the distant future. Our human rea-

soning tells us that it took eons to create the earth; why would God destroy it only 2,000 years after Christ? Of course, God is not guided by human reasoning.

The message in this passage for us is to be watchful. Not from a standpoint of trying to discern, or predict, the second coming of Christ, but that we may be prepared to meet him whenever he comes. And, that we may realize how important it is to witness to Christ to others so that they may receive him while there is time. Within this framework of thinking, the coming of Christ is something to look forward to rather than dread.

R&D *How do you feel about the second coming of Christ?*

Prayer: *Our time is now, Lord; help us to do with it what You would have us do.*

Thursday, September 14

Read: Luke 22:1-13

Passover

Jerusalem was crowded with people who had come for the festival. Many were undoubtedly supporters of Jesus (19:48; 21:38). If the chief priests had arrested Jesus while he was surrounded by his supporters, they would have invited disaster. What Judas agreed to do was to show them where Jesus went at night so that he could be taken quietly. We will never fully understand why Judas did what he did. There has always been speculation that he wanted to force Jesus to exercise the considerable powers he was known by his disciples to have. Surely it was not for the money involved. That it was for some selfish purpose, however, seems inescapable (v.3).

The Feast of Unleavened Bread lasted for seven days. The Passover was eaten on the first day in the late evening. Preparations would have included arrangements for the room; the purchase, sacrifice, and cooking of the lamb; the purchase of bread and wine; the making of a sauce of bitter herbs. Participants in the Passover reflected upon the event in two directions: (1) back toward Egypt when God rescued them and made Himself known to them as

their redeemer, and (2) forward to the time when God would again redeem His people and establish His kingdom.

“Go and prepare the Passover for us,” says Jesus (v.8). For us today the celebration of Holy Communion is our opportunity to participate in a Passover-like event in which we rejoice that God has redeemed us, and we go forward in the nourishment we receive from the holy table. “Go and prepare” is a message for us today; God calls us to prepare mentally and spiritually for communion with Him.

R&D What similarities and differences are there between the Passover meal and Holy Communion?

Prayer: Participating in the Lord's Supper is a great blessing, Lord; but we are grateful to You for being present with us all the time through Your Holy Spirit within us.

Friday, September 15

Read: Luke 22:14-23

Last Supper

In his actions in this passage Jesus did three things. He emphasized that the Passover was a prelude to what was about to happen to him. He associated the coming of the kingdom with his own suffering. He included his disciples in the redemption that he was about to accomplish. The sayings in verses 16-18 show that Jesus saw the Last Supper as an anticipation of the great feast of the kingdom of God (see vv.28-30).

By participating in Holy Communion, we too are encouraged to look toward the coming of the kingdom in its fullness. By speaking of the coming of the kingdom in relation to his own suffering, Jesus showed that he believed that his death would play a decisive part in God's purpose. This would be a new act of redemption. By sharing in the bread and wine, the apostles were included in the Lord's action. His death would not be something apart from them; they were in it too.

In the midst of all of this, Jesus reveals that one of the Twelve will betray him. Immediately, they begin to speculate among themselves who it will be. Why was that not obvious? Was

each man wondering, “Am I the one?” In our day, how well do we know ourselves and our likelihood to betray Christ?

R&D *When did you last betray Christ?*

Prayer: *Precious Jesus, we betray you whenever we are focused so much on ourselves that we are not open to what you would have us do.*

Saturday, September 16

Read: Luke 22:24-38

Confusion

Jesus’ statement about his betrayal in our last lesson leads to speculation and confusion among the apostles. Such moments of supreme spiritual importance seem to find Jesus’ followers strangely out of step with him. These verses are full of misunderstandings on the part of the disciples, yet they were the ones who had been our Lord’s closest companions (v.28).

The mention by Jesus of the kingdom led the apostles to argue over the place that each of them would occupy. In spite of Jesus’ previous teaching (9:46-48) and his continuous example to them, they still have not learned that Jesus’ style of leadership is through service. The apostles would exercise authority in the new Israel (v.30), but they would not be qualified to do so until they had lived through and learned from the trying experiences that lay ahead of them.

The Twelve had heard Jesus speak often enough about humility; now they were going to see it, and realize their own inability to match it. God teaches us by experience what we don’t learn in easier ways. Out of the failure of the coming days, Jesus was going to mold people who would become great leaders, especially Peter. Satan was going to test all of the apostles (“you” is plural in v.31), but Jesus had prayed especially for Peter (“you” is singular in v.32). Peter would go from total failure to bold leadership.

In the closing section of the passage (vv.35-38), Jesus is simply trying to warn them of the dangerous times ahead, and they overreact: “Look, Lord, here are two swords.” Jesus, perhaps concealing his exasperation, says, “That’s plenty.” (Peter is later rebuked for using a sword, vv.50-51.)

R&D *How may we do a better job of understanding what God expects of us that we may avoid spiritual confusion?*

Prayer: *When faced with major challenges there are seldom easy answers. Lord, give us the perseverance to understand and follow the path that You have for us.*

Sunday, September 17

Sabbath Time

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Colossians 3:15

The apostles had their differences; Saint Paul sometimes withstood Saint Peter to the face, but their union was in the Heart of Jesus. It is the same with us today. There are many divisions amongst Christian people, but when we are troubled about the divisions in the Church, we can remember that there is one Heart which is always faithful, and if we are tempted to despair of union amongst ourselves, we may, nonetheless, have hope of union in Him.

Monday, September 18

Read: Luke 22:39-53

Darkness

This is one of the most powerful passages in the Bible. In it, we are allowed to see something of what the cross cost Jesus. We observe his courage, his real human nature and his essential obedience. The secret of the calm he will display during his trial and execution is grounded in the battle he fought and won here. He sensed the powers of darkness closing around him and the apostles (v.53). They too must pray for strength to resist the temptation to turn away from the will of God. Exhausted by the tension and anxiety which had surrounded them, however, they fell asleep, and Jesus prayed alone.

Jesus believed that in his death was concentrated all the agonizing appeal of the love of God for His people and all the blindness of the people in rejecting that appeal (11:49-51). The cup which Jesus must drink is the symbol of death (Mark 10:38).

If we knew nothing more of Jesus than what we have been studying in the Gospel of Luke this year, his prayer would have a

ring of truth to it. “Remove this cup from me” demonstrates the humanness of Jesus in the face of suffering and death. “Nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done” evidences the trust and obedience. It is a prayer of confidence, addressed to God as Father, as Jesus would later do from the cross. Yet Jesus, in complete knowledge of the sinfulness of mankind, recognized the extent to which God hated evil (2 Corinthians 5:21). Even at that, could he fully comprehend the burden he would carry on the cross?

R&D *Reflect on what Jesus has done for us.*

Prayer: *“How deep the Father’s love for us, how vast beyond all measure, that He should give His only Son to make a wretch his treasure.”* (Stuart Townsend).

Tuesday, September 19

Read: Luke 22:54-71

Denial

In Luke’s account, Jesus is taken to the high priest’s house and held there. No proceedings took place until after the Sanhedrin had been summoned first thing in the morning. It was during the night that the guards displayed their special brand of cruelty that is not unknown in our own time, and Peter’s denial took place.

“And the Lord turned and looked at Peter” (v.61). How would we feel if each time we denied the Lord by our actions and inactions, our disloyalty and betrayal, we could see him turning and looking at us? At least Peter was there! Would we have been willing even to be within the area at such a time? And, we can surmise that Jesus’ look was not one of accusation, reproach. More likely, it was a look of compassion behind which lay understanding and forgiveness.

The Sanhedrin attempted to make Jesus condemn himself through his own words. An open claim to be the Messiah would have been enough for the Romans to have taken action, especially in view of the uneasy situation at the time of Passover. Jesus, however, preferred to speak of the Son of Man, the one exalted out of suffering to the place of authority (Daniel 7:13-14). His ambiguous reply (v.70) was taken as an affirmative, and quoted to Pilate as

such with the addition of the damaging title “king” (23:2). Their minds had already been made up; nothing Jesus said or did would make any difference now.

R&D *What about Peter, “What think you of him”?*

Prayer: *Lord God, when we agonize about the worldly concerns we often face, help us to look to Jesus and how he handled situations so much greater than ours to be without comparison.*

Wednesday, September 20

Read: Luke 23:1-12

Pilate

The charges (v.2) against Jesus were clearly false. The evidence consisted of two outright lies and a deliberate misunderstanding of Jesus’ words. The chief priests knew that Jesus would not admit to being “Christ a king” in the sense they wanted Pilate to understand that term. Pilate himself knew that it was a contrived charge, and said so. That should have been the end of the matter, but Pilate’s discernment was not matched by his courage. Instead of dismissing the charges, he seized upon the knowledge that Jesus was a Galilean to try to shift the responsibility to Herod.

Herod had apparently been intrigued with the idea of seeing Jesus and talking with him. Having heard of him, he wanted to see a miracle or two. Jesus would have none of that, and, in this gospel, it is Herod and his soldiers who contemptuously dress Jesus in royal robes and send him back to Pilate. Pilate apparently appreciated the sick joke and made friends with Herod as a result.

What irony we have here. Here are two men—one a puppet ruling only at the pleasure of Rome and the other an unsuccessful governor of a small Roman province—supposedly exercising authority and administering justice.

Before them stood Jesus, with the authority they lacked and in control of the situation. They thought they were passing judgment on him, but were, in fact, passing judgment only on themselves.

R&D *Jesus could probably have made friends with Herod and gotten the charges dismissed. It would have been the practical thing to do.*

When have you been tempted to do the practical thing rather than the will of God?

Prayer: *It is too easy, Lord Jesus, to rationalize away the challenges we have to show our faith in You. You have lived on this earth and know our weaknesses. Forgive us, Lord Christ.*

Thursday, September 21

Read: Luke 23:13-31

“Crucify Him”

Twice Pilate had made a decision (vv.16, 22) and both times failed to stick with it. He had lost control of the situation; it was now in the hands of the chief priests and the mob. Pilate had been successfully manipulated. The Gospel of John shows the sort of pressure that was used (19:12).

Verse 17 is an editorial comment that was later added to Luke’s Gospel to explain the Barabbas incident. Barabbas was actually guilty of one of the charges made against Jesus (insurrection). The guilty man is released, the innocent one condemned.

Simon of Cyrene, “who was coming in from the country,” was seized to carry Jesus’ cross. How often are we “coming in from the country” (from the familiar and comfortable) when God expects us to pick up the cross and follow Jesus?

Jesus was also being followed by women who bewailed and lamented him. At a time like this, it might be expected that Jesus would simply have let them get on with this traditional act of mourning. But, as on two previous occasions (11:27 and 14:15), Jesus refused to accept such conventional piety. The women were thinking of his death as it affected him; he wanted them to see it as it would affect them and those who would follow them. If they treat the Messiah like this, what will things be like when he is no longer around?

R&D *Are we in a time when the tree is green, or dry? Explain.*

Prayer: *Lord God, if we are open to Your guidance through the Holy Spirit within us, we will often experience the surprise of something You want us to do.*

Friday, September 22

Read: Luke 23:32-49

Crucifixion

For the most part, the gospels do not dwell on the physical pain of the crucifixion, but on what Jesus says, the attitudes of the people around the cross, and the significance of what is happening. A condemned criminal was supposed to read a public confession of his crime immediately before crucifixion. Instead, Jesus utters a prayer of forgiveness.

“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.” Hopefully, Jesus prays that prayer for us every time we crucify him with our unbelief. There is an element of evangelism and renewal that compels us to live the faith in its fullness that others may believe. The great sin of the Church—and of ourselves—is that we have not lived fully into the faith.

One of the criminals crucified with Jesus joins the soldiers and others in mocking him. The second criminal is convinced of Jesus’ innocence, and believes that he will come into his kingdom. Knowing his guilt, he makes his appeal to the one who suffers with him. No one else in the gospels addresses Jesus by name. His penitence and faith are rewarded.

The period of darkness is a symbol of the evil surrounding the cross (22:53). The rending of the curtain of the temple symbolizes the opening of access to the inner presence of God (Hebrews 10:19-20). In this manner, Luke shows us that what is happening extends far beyond the particular circumstances and people to the realm of ultimate reality.

R&D There is much symbolism and drama in this passage. What speaks most poignantly to you? Why?

Prayer: Your sacrifice for us, Lord Jesus, is too overwhelming for words.

Saturday, September 23

Read: Luke 23:50-56

Burial

In Jesus’ time, sunset marked the end of one day and the beginning of the next. The crucifixion took place on a Friday (the day

of preparation for the Sabbath), and the Sabbath began on what we would call Friday evening. There was a law which required that an executed criminal be buried before nightfall to prevent defilement of the land (Deuteronomy 21:22-23). Joseph of Arimathea saw that the requirements of this law were obeyed, but could only wrap the body in a linen shroud. The women had time before sunset to prepare the spices and ointments, but not to anoint the body. They rested on the Sabbath, from Friday until sunset on Saturday, but then it was too dark to do anything at the tomb. Thus, the visit to the tomb on Sunday morning was the first opportunity to perform the rites of a decent burial (24:1).

Joseph of Arimathea was brave enough to make the request for the body from Pilate. John's Gospel says that he was a secret disciple of Jesus (19:38); now he came out in the open. That gospel also says that Nicodemus assisted Joseph (19:39). Whether Joseph, like Nicodemus (John 7:50), spoke out against the actions of the Sanhedrin we do not know. In any event, now he wanted to disassociate himself from the actions of his colleagues and associate himself with Jesus by providing a tomb.

"Joseph ... was looking for the kingdom of God" (vv.50-51). There are many "Josephs" in this world. Their leanings are in the right direction and they are searching for a relationship with God. Can we show them the kingdom?

R&D *Do you know a "Joseph"? What are you doing about showing him the kingdom of God?*

Prayer: *Thank you, Blessed Christ, for those who come through for you at crucial times.*

Sunday, September 24

Sabbath Time

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

Our sermons are mostly the way we have of escaping from the hard work of prayer, apologizing for our sad deficiencies; if we really were holy people, it would be as unnecessary for us to preach as it is for a flower to advertise.

Read: Luke 24:1-12

Empty Tomb

The story of the resurrection reported by Luke is in his usual straightforward manner. Nothing is said or done for purely dramatic effect. The most dramatic of all events received no special publicity beyond Jesus' own prophecy concerning his rising from the dead which neither the apostles nor the women seem to have remembered.

That first Easter morning began in quiet sorrow as the women went on their mission to prepare the body. Finding the tomb empty was the last thing they expected, and they were at a total loss to explain it or to know what to do. They were still in the process of absorbing this initial shock when they were faced with the frightening vision of "two men in dazzling apparel."

"Why do you seek the living among the dead?" Just as our Lord never overwhelmed people with his power, so the resurrection is presented in such a way as to lead to faith based on thought and response rather than sensation. The women would have to answer the question for themselves. It is a question we need to answer as well.

Are we, today, living as though Jesus had never risen from the dead? Is he, for us, simply a pious memory or a living reality? The message of the Church is not just that Jesus rose from the dead but that *he is risen*. That is the faith that has transformed the world, and we are the ones whom Jesus is counting on to transform it further.

R&D *"These words seemed to them an idle tale" (v.11). How can we communicate the faith more effectively so that the truths we tell do not seem like idle tales?*

Prayer: *May the light of Christ be so deeply imbedded in us that it reflects God's love to the world around us.*

Read: Luke 24:13-35

Appearance

At a memorable international prayer conference years ago, there was a healthy distance between where teachings were held and where the participants ate and slept. Therefore, each time those attending the meeting began the walk from the plenary sessions back to get their meals, they were asked to pair up with one another and were given a question to discuss. It was an Emmaus walk.

The first Emmaus walk, which only appears in this gospel, is one of the most delightful and instructional narratives in the Bible. Cleopas and his friend were clearly not the only people on the road to Emmaus. It was Passover time and pilgrims who spent the day in the city would be heading home to the villages in the evening. So far as Cleopas knew, the one who joined them was simply one of these pilgrims on his way home. The two already knew that the tomb was empty and that the women had been told that Jesus was alive. Yet they remained completely despondent because their thoughts were fixed on their own hopes about how Israel was to have been redeemed.

Two factors stand out in the story. The first is that, as Jesus explained Scripture to them (specifically the kind of Messiah that the prophets had foreseen rather than the one of popular misconception), their hearts were strangely warmed. This should not be an uncommon experience for us today. The second is that they recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread. Likewise, this should be an experience with which we can identify in our own day by participating in Holy Communion.

R&D *When was your heart last “strangely warmed” through the study of Scripture?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord God, that we have Bibles we can read and understand in our day, and that the reading of them warms our hearts as well as enlightening our minds and awakening our spirit.*

Read: Luke 24:36-53

Presence

At the beginning of this study, you were encouraged to meditate upon it as you went along because the Gospel of Luke is, among other things, supremely the gospel of prayer. Of all the passages in this Gospel there is none that contains more material for meditation and deep thought than this one. Within these few verses we have evidence to his disciples of Jesus' resurrection, the opening of their minds to understand Scripture, the call to preach repentance and forgiveness to all nations, the call to witness, the promise of the Holy Spirit, and Jesus' ascension. In Luke's Gospel, it is as though these things took place all at one time, whereas, from the Gospel of John and from Luke's own testimony in his introduction to Acts (1:1-10), we know that Jesus was with the disciples for a training period after his resurrection.

We have seen, as we have studied together over these months, the elements mentioned in this closing passage. We have noted the importance of the resurrection and the need for us to live what we say: "He is risen!" We have considered the importance of the call to *repentance*; perhaps nothing is more vital to the future of the Church than for us who call ourselves Christians to fall on our knees in repentance for whom we have not been and what we have not done for the sake of Christ. We have learned that *forgiving and being forgiven* is at the heart of the Christian message, and it has been made abundantly clear to us that we are to *witness* to that message in word and deed wherever we are whenever we can. We know that the *Holy Spirit* was promised by Jesus to guide us in all our ways, and that it was only by *ascending* to be on the right hand of God that he could be present to all of his followers for all time through that Holy Spirit. If we have absorbed these truths into our minds and hearts, and we carry them out in our lives, we will truly be in the kingdom of God. "For all of the promises of God find their Yes in Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 1:20).

R&D *What has been most meaningful to you in this study of the Gospel of Luke?*

Prayer: *You have called us and equipped us, Lord. Now it is our time to respond.*



Philippians

Thursday, September 28

Read: Acts 16:6-12

Introduction

Paul's visit occurred on his second missionary journey. It came as a result of his "Macedonian vision" (v.9). Silas, Timothy, and Luke were with him. They were probably there only for several weeks. Yet the depth of Paul's love for the Philippians and his concern for their well-being convey a feeling somewhere between a love letter and one to very dear friends. It is decidedly the most personal and tender of all Paul's letters.

Paul is writing his friends from prison, either in Rome or Caesarea, near the end of his life. Disagreement over the place of writing goes back to the early church. Origen (the third century) said, "Only God knows where Philippians was really written." For our purposes what is important is to hear Paul's repeated use of the words "joy" and "rejoice" some fourteen times while realizing that he was writing from prison.

If one of Paul's themes is "Be joyful," and we have days when we don't feel joyful, we might well approach this study with the simple question, "How can I be joyful?"

Precisely because it is such a personal letter, the Epistle to the Philippians tends to be less formal than some of Paul's other letters. It moves from subject to subject in direct contrast to a letter like Romans. Yet Paul has definite concerns in mind. They center around the theme of unity. He is aware of the problem of false teachers as well as a specific dispute between two leaders of the church there. Rather than attack the problems head-on, he does some loving and encouraging and teaching first. But when it's time to be direct, he is.

R&D *How do you maintain fellowship with friends when you are miles apart? Are you aware of including emotions as well as facts and news when you contact a friend?*

Prayer: *Lord, people are more interested that we care than they care what we think.*

Friday, September 29

Read: Philippians 1:1-2

Salutation

In the opening verses of Philippians, we find several features which are typical of letters in Paul's day but several others that are quite remarkable. Typically, ancient letters opened with a set format identifying the sender and the recipient and then a greeting. By choosing to write a letter, not a treatise, Paul obviously had a special audience in mind. However, the letter format would indicate that he was unaware that he was leaving behind him theological writings for future generations.

Now we come to the more remarkable aspects of the two verses. First, Paul gives Timothy equal billing with himself. Only here in all his writings does Paul link another name with his own in this way. This does not mean the letter was jointly written. Nor does it mean that Paul saw Timothy having equal apostolic authority with himself. Though Timothy would have been known to the Philippians, he was a relatively low-profile member of Paul's team. The best explanation suggested by scholars is that Paul wanted to teach the lessons of humility and equality among Christians by his own example. Humility turns out to be interrelated to the unity theme of the letter.

Second, how does the label "slave" strike you? "Slaves of Christ Jesus" is the literal label that Paul gives Timothy and himself. Whether you read it as slave or servant, the designation clearly indicates subordination to a master. The big difference is that this master is himself humble yet supremely worthy of being served.

Paul's subordination was first to Jesus Christ and second to the Church. In an age of "my rights" and assertiveness, how readily would we claim to be servants or slaves of Jesus and of his Church?

A missionary in India always signed her letters with “S.O.J.” after her name. When asked what it meant, she replied “slave of Jesus” with a big smile. She gave new meaning to the phrase “whose service is perfect freedom.”

A third remarkable feature comes in the inclusiveness of the word “all” when linked to the saints. Only in Romans and here does Paul address *all* the believers. Because the word occurs often in this letter (look for it) it serves as a subtle call to unity. Paul wants to avoid taking sides, so he writes to *all*.

R&D *What can we learn from Paul’s inclusiveness about the way we welcome people to our churches, about the way we undertake evangelism and outreach?*

Prayer: *All people are created equal by You, Lord God. Help us to see You in them.*

Saturday, September 30

Read: Philippians 1:3-11

Prayer

When someone has sincere confidence in you, how does it make you feel? If the person is joy-filled about it, isn’t that like icing on the cake? From childhood I was blessed by a grandfather and a godmother who were both. Here *all* the Philippian Christians are on Paul’s heart as he bursts into this hymn of thanksgiving. Imagine how encouraged it must have made them feel to hear such words from their father in the faith.

Paul mentions their partnership or sharing in the gospel with him. He uses a favorite word (*koinonia*) to describe this relationship. Far more than the way we use “fellowship,” it takes in the idea of active participation (including their financial support of Paul) and solidarity with him which he echoes later in verse 7. This kind of gospel partnership is costly.

The confidence which Paul displays, like joy, permeates this letter. His confidence or “conviction,” as it is translated in some other places, rests in God and the work He is doing, not the good works of the Philippians (see 2:13). “The one” who began the good work of salvation is of course God Himself.

Paul is a man unafraid of showing the depths of his emotions for these converts. Not only does he hold them in his heart, he yearns for them with the heart or compassion of Christ Jesus. Here he is conveying the idea of deep inner emotion.

At a small group Bible study, I prayed Paul's intercessory prayer (vv.9-11) before we shared Holy Communion together. The group felt encouraged and built up as well as called into further growth and commitment. Exactly what Paul intended for the recipients of his letter!

R&D *Who has had confidence in you, and what effect has it had on you? How do you encourage others?*

Prayer: *Thank you, Lord, for the gift of encouragement. It is a joy to those who convey it and those who receive it.*

Sunday, October 1

Sabbath Time

For the wages of sin is death. Romans 6:23a

We are apt to treat sin lightly, and yet, just as an acorn has in it all the potentiality of an oak, and that little thing, left to develop, becomes that immense thing, a great spreading oak, so a little selfishness has in it the potentiality of the crucifixion of Christ. Leave a selfish sin to develop, and there is no human providence which can tell to what that selfishness may develop.

Monday, October 2

Read: Philippians 1:12-30

In Chains for Christ

Most North American Christians have not known anyone who, like Paul, was literally "in chains for Christ." Growing up I wondered about the meaning of a family shield which said in Latin "In adversity we shine." I hope the originators of that crest understood Paul's source of strength and rejoicing in adversity. It was all for Christ.

What were the results of Paul's "adversity"? Because of his chains, the gospel became more widely known. He first mentions the palace guard. If Paul was in Rome, this would mean several thousand soldiers.

Next, in verses 14-18, Paul says the Christians were bold to speak about their faith. However, the gospel was being advanced out of wrong motives as well as good motives (see verses 15-17). Is this hard for us to swallow? Notice that Paul “tells it like it is.” Some are motivated by wanting to make more trouble for Paul, perhaps envious of his achievements. Yet Paul’s incredible comment about both those with wrong and with right motives is, “It does not matter; as long as Christ is preached, I rejoice.”

One other result of Paul’s adversity is that it may be an encouragement to the Philippians and to us when we are faced with “chains” of some sort in our lives. Paul calls it the privilege of “suffering for Christ” (v.29).

R&D *To what extent can we honestly say, like Joseph towards his brothers (Genesis 50:15-21), “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good”?*

Prayer: *Guide us, Lord Christ, when faced with adversity, to look to you rather than to our limited perspective.*

Tuesday, October 3

Read: Philippians 2:1-11

Imitating Christ’s Humility

The second half of this passage (vv.5-11) is often called the Christ Hymn and its poetic rhythm is best understood by reading it aloud. It celebrates both the humility of our Lord and his glory or exaltation. Often hymns capture the human and divine nature of Jesus better than creeds. But Paul includes it here to reinforce his plea to the Philippians to imitate a spirit of humility.

Paul sees humility and unity as interrelated and essential to Christian community. Paul wants the Philippians to develop unity in their church. The gist of it is quite simple: unity flows from humility. So, all you need to do, says Paul, is become humble.

While it may sound simple, anyone who has tried to become humble knows it does not come naturally to most of us. What’s more, do you enjoy being confronted by your own self-centeredness? I don’t. Meditating on verses 3 and 4 frankly makes me squirm. Try it and see.

Paul can urge us toward a selfless attitude because of his own generosity toward the people who preach Christ out of selfish ambition (1:17). The point is for Christian community, which means our local congregation, to be built up. The characteristics of unity (like-mindedness, love, oneness in spirit, and purpose) will be enhanced as the community practices humility. F. F. Bruce, in his commentary, says Paul is pleading for “unanimity of heart,” not some formal requirement of adhering to a party line with no debate allowed.

R&D *To what extent are humility and unity hallmarks of your congregation? Your church leaders?*

Prayer: *Our achievements are gifts from You, Lord.*

Wednesday, October 4

Read: Philippians 2:12-18

Shining Like Stars

The church is sometimes called a society which exists primarily for the benefit of nonmembers. When God set the sun, moon, and stars in their places at creation, His intent was that they shine not for their own sake, but to give light to the world. So, when Paul tells the Philippians to shine like stars, it is for the benefit of all those around them who live in darkness. As Christians we are to shine “for the benefit of nonmembers.” This is a call to a lifestyle of evangelism!

What will make the Philippians (and us) shine? First, working out our salvation as God works in us. This job description for a Christian community, not just the individual believer, involves a two-fold understanding. There is our working toward the health of the church; there is *God* working through the Holy Spirit, giving us the will and power to obey Him.

Second, they will shine more brightly as they deal with their disunity. Two signs of it are mentioned in verse 14. As long as complaining and arguing are characteristic of our church life, outsiders won't be attracted. Our light will be dulled. Paul calls for Philippians to become “blameless, pure ... without fault.” That's

what shining looks like. Yes, it is a tall order but remember, says Paul, it is God Himself who is always at work in you.

Finally, we are to convey or hold out the word of life. As a community of Christians, we do this as much by our manner of life, our welcoming the stranger, our reaching out to those who differ from us, as by our actual words. That is what the phrase “lifestyle evangelism” means.

R&D *Would people in your town describe your church as a shining star or a low battery flashlight? Why?*

Prayer: *“This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.”*

Thursday, October 5

Read: Philippians 2:19-30

Fellow Workers

Sharing with one another our stories of faith can be very affirming and uplifting. It helps us in our journey of faith to know of others, how God has worked in their lives and what the results have been. So it is as we experience Paul talking about Timothy and Epaphroditus.

Timothy should be an inspiration to us all. Here was a young man who showed a Christ-like concern for others (see 2:4ff). Despite the fact that self-interest was abounding (v.21)—is it any different in our day?—Timothy displayed concern for Paul himself, for the gospel and for the Philippians. During his ministry, there were many fellow workers who supported Paul and were deeply loved by him, but no one more than Timothy.

We can greatly admire Timothy, but perhaps we can identify more closely with Epaphroditus. Here was a fellow worker who was well-intentioned but not adequate to the task he had been given. He had been sent by the Philippian church to minister to Paul, but it appears that Paul did the ministering! Epaphroditus apparently became homesick and then truly sick. Paul needed to encourage him, then to care for him. In the meantime, the Philippians had become concerned about him, as he had been at the point of death (v.27). Paul decides to send him back home but is worried

that the Philippians will not receive him well but will look at him as a failure. Thus, Paul encourages them to receive him gladly, recognizing his sincerity and courage.

This passage gives us an intimate glimpse of the real Paul. Here he is planning to send away two of his fellow workers whom he loved. Yet rather than feeling sorry for himself, he is busy paving the way for their journey. Paul was definitely one who practiced what he preached.

R&D When have you had to allow a loved one to part when you desperately wanted him or her to remain with you? How did you feel?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for those (such as parents) who have “let us go” when we needed to go, and especially those who have “paved the way” for our life and ministry.

Friday, October 6

Read: Philippians 3:1-11

Externals

One of the primary problems being dealt with in the Letter to the Philippians was the interference of the “Judaizers”—converts to Christianity from Judaism who insisted that converts to the faith, even from paganism, should adopt some of the externals of Judaism such as circumcision. Paul deals with the problem by giving his own credentials to speak on the subject (vv.4-6). Paul was, by any standard, a “Hebrew of Hebrews.” Yet, he had learned that no one could acquire status before God by such externals.

A fact very clear about Christianity from Scripture is that a person’s external conditions are of no importance to God. Actually, in attempting to grow in faith, these externals can be more of a distraction than a help. Either they become an end in themselves, overshadowing the essentials of the faith; or, they become a new set of laws the burden of which cannot be carried. To be in relationship with God, we need to let go of those things that distract us from being the person He calls us to be.

Having shaken off such externals in his own life, Paul confidently asserts that all he cares to know is Christ and the power of his resurrection (v.10). His focus is to experience the lordship of

Christ in his life, including sharing in Christ's suffering. This harkens us back to 2:5-11, the humility of our Lord, and yet his glorification. It is by partaking in the ordeal of Christ's servanthood that we share in the triumph of his exaltation. It is the vision of the glory that can carry us through the valleys of self-denial.

R&D *What externals are hampering your relationship with God right now?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, our lives are filled with distractions; help us to keep our focus on you.*

Saturday, October 7

Read: Philippians 3:12—4:1

Pressing On

This passage gives us a description of the Christian's journey toward holiness. There are five stages that surface:

1. We have not yet arrived. A first step in the journey is to realize that we will never complete it in this lifetime. But, we must always hold before us both the necessity and the possibility of becoming Christ-like.

2. We are on the way. Once we have given our lives to Christ, he will not let go of us. He will work in us to perfect us, if we will just cooperate in that effort.

3. We are to forget the past. That is, we are not to hold onto the old life of sin and death; we are not to let it entice us or distract us. Nor may we rest on past achievements; every day a new victory must be won.

4. We are to press on. God is always ahead of us, calling us onward. Paul uses language that implies an uphill climb. We don't give up, looking for the easy way, but persevere even when the going gets tough.

5. We will attain the goal. The prize is to be with the glorified Christ in whom we have our part and by whom we shall, at the last, be transformed. It is a journey that will be beset by problems from within (vv.15-16) and pressures from without (vv.17-19). Thus, the call to "stand firm in the Lord."

R&D *Where are you on your journey of faith?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, for the challenge and for the assurance of victory in Christ.*

Sunday, October 8

Sabbath Time

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. Romans 8:14

We are all being led, whether we like to admit it or not, and we are all in some way leading others, because we cannot help influencing people by the way in which we live ourselves. We ought to think seriously by what spirit we are led.

Monday, October 9

Read: Philippians 4:2-9

Rejoice

A major theme of this letter has been unity through humility (especially 2:1-11). Paul now applies this theme to a particular situation of two women who have been quarrelling. The fact that it is mentioned in this letter indicates that it is a serious situation. Thus, Paul basically begs both parties to be reconciled, and calls for help (v.3) that something might be done about the situation.

Joy is certainly another theme of the letter. “Rejoice in the Lord always” catches the real meaning of Paul’s command. The repetition makes it even more dramatic. There was much about which it would have been hard for Paul to be “happy,” and yet he was filled with joy. Joy is centered in a person’s relationship with God; it runs much deeper than happiness.

As Paul is drawing his letter to an end, he begins to add a few other reminders of what the Christian life is all about. There is the admonition to “fear not” (“have no anxiety about anything”); there is the call to prayer, accompanied by the reminder to give thanks; there is the assurance of “the peace that passes all understanding.”

The Philippians are also encouraged to reflect upon the many things concerning which they have reason to praise God. Instead of being focused on the problems, they are asked to look upon the good things and to think about them. Finally, they are to have Paul as their example. Paul knows that whatever is good in him is from God—he never contends otherwise—and thus he can,

in humility, call others to do what they have learned and received and heard and seen in him (v.9b).

R&D *Who has been a good example, in Christ, to you?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, for those who have gone before us to show us the way to Christ.*

Tuesday, October 10

Read: Philippians 4:10-23

Gratitude

Paul is grateful to the Philippians for all they have done for him. They had sent him a gift and a helper (Epaphroditus). He appreciated both because he had limited resources and few friends (2:20ff). On the one hand, Paul wants to affirm the generosity of the Philippians; on the other, he wants them to know that he is content.

Contentment, certainly in the Christian sense, is tied to maturity. The Christian who has faced life in all its variety—its disappointments as well as its opportunities—has perhaps come to the point of getting things in balance, and has achieved some measure of contentment. Paul had clearly faced the ups and downs of life (v.12), and the contentment that had come to him as a result was based on trust. He could deal with all of these things “in him who strengthens me” (v.13b).

Those who put their trust in things of the world are either eaten up with ambition concerning what they have *not* attained, or will be consumed with anxiety because, having acquired them, they fear their loss. Paul has abandoned all such securities (3:7ff) and has set his heart on Christ alone. That Christ is reliable and able to sustain in every circumstance of life is as true for the Philippians (and for you and me) as it is for Paul (v.19).

God does not satisfy all of our wants, but He does meet our real need. What we need most of all is a living, loving relationship with Him; and that He will not withhold. “To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

R&D *What has been the most significant new thing you have learned from this study of the Epistle to the Philippians?*

Prayer: *We are grateful, Dear Lord, that there is always more for us to learn about You and how You want us to live.*

Wednesday, October 11

Read: Philippians 3:12-16

The Greatest Lesson

As a way of concluding our study of the Epistle to the Philippians, perhaps it would be helpful to go back to a portion already studied and look at its application in the life of a well-known Christian leader, Dr. Leighton Ford. Ford tells the story in the book, *The Greatest Lesson*.

Sandy, the Ford's oldest son, died of heart trouble when he was only 21. He had been a track star. He did not survive a lengthy operation during which many people—family and friends—were praying fervently for him.

A year later, still in great pain over Sandy's death, Ford's younger son, Kevin, said, "But, Dad, maybe Sandy's influence has been far greater than if he had lived. His life was like a very bright light—a spotlight—focused intensely. But his death has been a floodlight. It has covered a much wider area." On reflection, Leighton Ford could see how God had taken godly characteristics of Sandy and placed them in friends who had loved him: more compassion into one and more commitment into another.

Later, standing on the track where Sandy had run his last race, Ford drew the finish line in the sand with his toe. He realized that the finish line is also the starting line. Perhaps life is not the race, but only the training session, and that eternity is the real race. "So a son leaves a legacy for a father. I have determined to run my race for Christ to the end. And when that time comes, maybe our Savior will let Sandy come running to meet me. Then with all the sons and daughters of the resurrection, our hearts will beat, and we will run for God forever."

R&D How do you feel about Christian friends or relatives who have "run the race" but been stopped by death before the normal finish?

Prayer: *Our time is now, Lord Jesus; may we draw from it what we have because of those who have led the way for us in you.*



Colossians

Thursday, October 12

Read: Colossians 1:1-8

Introduction

Paul's friend Epaphras had evangelized the Colossians, and it was probably he who had advised Paul (at this time a prisoner, presumably in Rome) that false teachings were threatening the purity of the church's life and faith there. Thus, this letter. The false teaching was apparently a combination of Christian principles and certain esoteric cultic practices, scrupulous dietary regulations, and some ascetic tendencies. The name "Gnosticism" is generally given to this combination of ideas.

Probably the false teachers held that sin was not so much a matter of disobedience as inability; that a person's spirit (essentially good) was imprisoned in his material body (essentially bad). Therefore, salvation was achieved through the release of this captive spirit, and Christ was one of several intermediary heavenly beings who revealed the secret of how this release could be effected. As a result, Paul's focus in this letter is the most expressive exposition of Christ's divinity and of his cosmic work of salvation that the New Testament contains. Christ is in *every* way supreme, for in him dwells God's complete being.

Paul typically begins his letter with prayer and thanksgiving. His thanksgiving is not only for the church at Colossae, but for the world-wide spread of the gospel. Although Christians were, at the time, only a tiny, uninfluential minority of the known world's inhabitants, he could say with confidence that "indeed in the whole world [the gospel] is bearing fruit and growing." Christians today are conscious of still being a minority and having less direct influence than in the past. Is it time for us to look afresh at the gospel, to give thanks for churches and people who are faithful to it, and,

with renewed vigor and enthusiasm, to proclaim it boldly to a sick world?

R&D *If you were writing a letter to the Christian Church today, what would your message be?*

Prayer: *Awaken us, Lord Christ, to be the people you call us to be in a world desperately in need of you.*

Friday, October 13

Read: Colossians 1:9-12

Prayer

Paul's prayer for the church at Colossae is rich in spiritual insights and worthy of our own use in intercessions or in praying for ourselves. There are several features that deserve special comment.

The prayer is basically practical. Wisdom and spiritual understanding are sought not just for their own sake but in order to inform and guide lives that will be lived in a way that is worthy of the Lord. Understanding and practice are to go hand in hand. The study of Scripture, for instance, is of no value to us if we only allow it to inspire us; it must inspire us to action.

This is not a call to activism for its own sake, however. Paul speaks of "bearing fruit in *every* good work" along with "increasing in the knowledge of God." In the activist world in which we live today, it is too easy to get caught up in *doing* to the exclusion of *being*, thus not really having time for God. Unless we are increasing in our knowledge of God, we will not know what He wants us to do nor how to do it in the manner He desires.

Paul, ever practical, next acknowledges that Christians will face trial and difficulty. He prays for "endurance and patience with joy." He undergirds it with the call that they be "strengthened with all power" and he concludes by reminding the Colossians who they are and whose they are. By its *very* nature (in standing against the world's way of looking at things) the practice of the Christian faith will lead to rejection and pain, but the good news is that, in being faithful to God's call upon our lives, there is strength and joy in be-

ing His “special agents” (“ambassadors for Christ,” 2 Corinthians 5:20).

R&D *See it you can adapt the words of today’s passage to be your own prayer.*

Prayer: *You are an accessible God—always available to us through prayer.*

Saturday, October 14

Read: Colossians 1:13-20

The Cosmic Christ

Today’s passage is one of the most remarkable in the New Testament. It contains staggering affirmations, especially when we realize that they are being said about someone who was crucified only a few decades earlier.

It would appear that the Colossians had responded to the gospel as a message that assured them of the forgiveness of their sins through Christ. They believed, however, that there were invisible forces at work in the world (“dominion of darkness,” v.13, “thrones, dominions, principalities, authorities,” v.16) which could still be a threat to their lives. Perhaps they questioned whether Christ was a strong enough savior to protect them from all of these evil powers.

In answer to this problem, Paul speaks of Christ as belonging to a higher order than all of these evil forces. He is the firstborn of all creation in whom all things were created. He is before all things and above all things. His saving work therefore encompasses all of creation; he cannot be challenged by any supernatural powers. “In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (v.19).

We still face powers of darkness today, and might well question, from time to time, Christ’s power to overcome them. As a friend recently said, “It does appear that Satan is winning.” We, of course, only see things in the short run, and must rely on the promises of God that, in the long run, things will work out in accordance with His purposes. We must not underestimate the dimensions of the faith we possess.

R&D *What victories of Christ can you discern in today’s world?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord God, that we can begin each day by putting on the Whole Armor of God (Ephesians 6:10-18).*

Sunday, October 15

Sabbath Time

“And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin.” Matthew 6:28

Our Lord Jesus Christ came to change and purify our thoughts. Many papers suggest that life consists in what we have, that the true riches are material goods. We learn from our Lord another set of values. He taught the blessedness of poverty as an escape from the bondage of material life, and that life does not consist in what we have but in what we are. We brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of the world. In ourselves is the true happiness or unhappiness, the true riches or poverty.

Monday, October 16

Read: Colossians 1:21-27

The Divine Mystery

Today’s passage contains one of the most poignant phrases in the Bible: “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (v.27) and one of the most controversial: “in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (v.24). The passage needs to be seen against a backdrop of the ideas prevalent in Paul’s day.

The first is the idea of sacrificial offerings that was basic to both Jewish and Gentile religion. Paul is telling the Colossians that the perfect self-offering of Christ in obedience to God is the basis of the self-offering of Christians. The self-offering that we know to be our proper response to God lies in identifying ourselves with Christ in his crucifixion (v.22).

The second has to do with the difficult statement in verse 24 mentioned above. Paul thinks of the sufferings he is experiencing as completing the sufferings of Christ himself. Christ died to save the Church, but the Church must be built up and extended and kept strong and pure. Therefore, anyone who does Christ’s work of extending the kingdom, establishing the faith, saving it from error, is doing the very work of Christ which he could only do through his followers.

“Mystery” religions were a feature of Paul’s world. Their primary belief was that there was a secret of salvation known only to a select group (thus, the gnostic influence even among Christians earlier referred to). Paul insists that there is a *Christian mystery* (vv.26-27), but it is not for a select few. It is to be universally proclaimed for it provides the universal hope of salvation which God gives through Christ.

R&D *What does “Christ in you, the hope of glory” mean to you?*

Prayer: *It is our hope in you, Lord Jesus, upon which we build our lives.*

Tuesday, October 17

Read: Colossians 1:28—2:5

Maturing in Christ

It was a teaching of many of the sects of Paul’s time that only a limited number of people were capable of receiving the full benefits of the sect’s teaching and the salvation it promised. As we have already seen, Paul, on the other hand, stresses the universal nature of the Christian gospel. In verse 28 he spells out more clearly what he means. Christian maturity is the goal of every Christian.

That is still the goal in our day, but how is it working out? It has been said that the greatest weakness of the Church today is the weakness of its own witness. Too often, those outside the Christian faith see little if any difference between people who call themselves Christians and those who do not. The answer may well be our inability to motivate and equip the average lay person in the essentials of the faith that he or she might be growing toward Christian maturity. If a person knows little about what he is supposed to believe and thus is confused about how to practice those beliefs, he is truly a weak witness to the world. And he can be easily led astray by false teaching (v.4).

Contemporary systems of thought do have an impact even on the most committed Christians. Today, one of those systems is the belief that “everything is relative.” At such times, and all of the time, we need to know the assurance we have in Christ. “Hold to Christ and for the rest be totally uncommitted” (Butterfield).

R&D *What are some of the steps involved in becoming mature in Christ?*

Prayer: *Help us to remember, Lord God, that Christ is life and everything else is details.*

Wednesday, October 18

Read: Colossians 2:6-14

In Union with Christ

Paul begins today's passage with the statement that we are of Christ and therefore need to "live in him." We are to be in union with Christ, "established in the faith" and "abounding in thanksgiving." Against that background, he then gets specific about the false teachers who are creating problems in the Colossian church.

If these teachers are alleging that Christ was only one mediator among many, Paul makes it clear that Jesus is the very embodiment of the deity. If they are saying that sacrifices were still an essential means of approaching God, then the Colossians should be clear that Christ was a perfect sacrificial victim who ended the validity of the Jewish system. If they were alleging that circumcision was still binding on Christians, Christ's victory on the cross had, instead, brought forgiveness and made possible a new kind of life.

Paul's concern is both with what Christ has done and what it means for the believer. He draws a contrast between the Jewish rite of circumcision and the Christian rite of baptism. They are similar in that each is a formal entry into a community of faith. Yet, they are different, because one of the fundamental doctrines of Paul is that the Church has taken the place of Israel in the plan of God. So, it would be absurd to be circumcised physically in order to prepare for baptism; the Church's rite of initiation is "made without hands."

R&D *Are there false teachers in the Church today? If so, how should we deal with them?*

Prayer: *Guide us, Holy Spirit, away from false teachings and other distractions that could lead us away from the path God has for us to follow.*

Read: Colossians 2:15-23

Beyond Rules

Paul tells us that Christ, through his death on the cross, has “disarmed the principalities and powers, and made a public example of them.” There are practical implications to this, and, in today’s passage, Paul deals with religious practice. A pattern of religious life that concentrates on precisely defined ritual observances and ascetic practices falls short of the mark. He mentions its failures in three particulars.

First, verse 17, it focuses its attention on inessentials instead of essentials. (The contrast between shadow and substance in this verse probably has reference to the contrast between Jewish law and Christ’s fulfillment of it.) This danger is one that every person faces in one way or another. We can become too ritualistic, focusing on the act itself and not the underlying meaning of it. Or we can become legalistic and unloving.

Second, verse 20, it fails to see the true significance of our dying with Christ in our baptism. We are to have “died to the elemental spirits of the universe.” We need not pretend that there are not forces in the world and in ourselves that threaten us. But, if we have committed ourselves to the person of Christ, they no longer pose an ultimate threat. Our lives should be free of the anxiety and scrupulosity which often hold people captive.

Third, verse 23, it puts too much emphasis on self-sacrifice for its own sake. Ascetic rules can be helpful both physically and spiritually, but they should not become an end in themselves. They are of limited value and are helpful only if they point us to Christ.

R&D What inessentials of the faith might I be engaging in at the expense of freedom in Christ?

Prayer: Blessed Christ, there is no substitute for life in you. May we avoid any and all substitutes that lead us astray.

Read: Colossians 3:1-4

With Christ in Glory

In baptism, the Christian not only “dies with Christ” but also is being raised to life in him. Paul does not seem to distinguish between resurrection and ascension in the manner that we perhaps do. The resurrection was not the resuscitation of a corpse so that it could resume a normal life, but the transition of Jesus to a new realm of existence in the presence of the Father. Being raised in Christ has at least two implications for us.

First, the center of our concern should be “things above” rather than “things on earth.” This can easily suggest an attitude of seeing life here on earth as something we must grudgingly get through in order to gain eternity with Christ. The difference between things above and things on earth, however, is not the difference between a future heavenly existence and a present earthly one. As Paul will make clear later in the epistle, it is rather a difference in ways of looking at the existence we know, i.e., the one here on earth. The Christian should see it as lived in the continual presence of God and as having meaning in and for God.

Second, though existence here on earth is of great importance, it is not the whole story for the Christian. We can only imagine what life beyond will be like; we really have very little to go on in speculating about it, and such speculation can even be counterproductive. Paul says what needs to be said. Our hope is based on our identification with Christ and Christ’s identification with God which the resurrection declares.

R&D How can we keep from getting “things above” and “things on earth” tangled up with one another in our lives?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord God, that, once we give our lives to Christ, we live eternally with You, first here on earth and then with You in the life to come.

Read: Colossians 3:5-11

Old Life

Paul can be a mind-stretching theologian, but he always comes back to practical examples. Today's passage, as well as the next one, spell out the moral implications of faith in Christ's death and resurrection, first negatively and then positively. The fact that the heart of Christian discipline is identification with Christ rather than blind obedience to rules does not mean that there are no acts or attitudes that are to be avoided.

The specific things mentioned are not as important as the idea behind them. The essential thing, according to Paul, is to see this kind of behavior in its full context. The old life, which included activities and thoughts such as those listed, is supposed to have been left behind. In Christ, the Colossians have attained to a new life that is to be lived in the image of God. We should not do those things that He would not want us to do.

Almost parenthetically, Paul notes that one of the greatest effects of the new life in Christ is that it breaks down all the barriers of the past (v.11). In the ancient world, there were many barriers. The Greeks were the aristocrats of the ancient world and thus looked down on those of lower intellectual status. The Jews, on the other hand, were God's chosen people and therefore looked down on others as being theologically inferior. Christianity destroyed barriers between nationalities, rituals, intellects, and classes. Christians worshiped with one another in a fellowship of love that was blind to the barriers that had so divided the people of the world.

R&D *What barriers now exist within churches that need to be broken down?*

Prayer: *Loving Lord, show us how to be more effective in breaking down barriers that separate.*

And Jesus said, "Who was it who touched me?" Luke 8:45a

Interruptions come into every life, and lives are very largely proved by the way in which interruptions are met. If we look back over the course of our lives, most of us will thank God for many of the interruptions, which have over them the providence of God, and come to us accompanied with the grace of God to draw from them what is for the shaping of our own souls. Interruptions are part of life's vocation, and if we see them in that light, they may alter our arrangements, but they will not alter our direction.

Monday, October 23

Read: Colossians 3:12-17

New Life

In today's passage we have the positive side of what Paul sees as the distinctively Christian character.

First, there is love. Love is not just one in a list of virtues, however. It is what binds all of the rest of them together. It is an attitude of the whole person which reflects what the Christian life is all about.

Second, the Christian has a model in the person of Christ himself. This is not so much an imitating of the acts of Jesus as living in the light of Christ's life as a whole. The very purpose of his coming was to provide, through the cross, forgiveness of our sins. Forgiveness of others is therefore a necessary characteristic of the Christian.

Third, the gospel of Christ is not just a past reality to which the Christian looks back for guidance. It is a living reality in the present. The peace of Christ is not an escapist attitude but a sense of assurance that provides, even in the worst of times, a deep-seated reliance on the graciousness of God.

Fourth, all of this becomes real to us through the fellowship of the Body of Christ, the Church, as we teach and admonish one another, sing hymns and spiritual songs, and give thanks to God.

R&D In what ways does my church equip me to be the person God calls me to be?

Prayer: *Teach me your ways, Blessed Jesus, day by day.*

Tuesday, October 24

Read: Colossians 3:18-4:1

Godly Relationships

Our immediately preceding passage from Colossians ended with the admonition to “do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.” If all of life is to be lived in the name of the Lord Jesus (i.e., on the basis of what we know about him), we need to work out what that means in terms of the various relationships in which we find ourselves. That is what Paul is helping us to do in today’s passage.

In all three cases he cites (husband-wife, father-child, master-slave) Paul stresses that the one who, according to the prevailing attitude in his own day, was regarded as subordinate or inferior should be looked on as one precious in the eyes of the Lord and should be treated as such.

It is important to recognize that Paul was writing concerning situations as they existed in his time and not ours. He basically accepts the social attitudes of his day and seeks to bring the spirit of Christ to bear upon them. In our day, social arrangements are different from Paul’s, but the principle is still the same.

That principle is that there is a continual need for Christians to bring the light of their faith to bear on the increasingly complex patterns of social responsibility in our own day. It is not an easy task. The essential thing is to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus.

R&D What relationships in which you are involved need to be reviewed in light of this teaching?

Prayer: *May Christ’s call upon us as servants always be the key in thinking about our relationship with others.*

Wednesday, October 25

Read: Colossians 4:2-6

Concluding Remarks

Prayer was an essential for Paul; he speaks of it often in his letters. Here his stress is on group prayer. Prayer was perhaps the vital link binding together small groups of Christians in hostile environments. In what we know of oppressive regimes, persons in such prayer groups have held the faith over decades of godless rule.

Paul's discussion of "declaring the mystery of Christ" probably had to do with preaching the gospel. The "mystery" is what draws people beyond the secular, materialistic level on which much of life is lived. But the message must be "made clear;" otherwise it can hardly be good news for ordinary people. Some preachers make the gospel too complicated, others too easy.

Perhaps we have a picture of Paul as being very brave and dedicated, but perhaps a little heavy-handed. It is refreshing here to find the call to tact and sensitivity toward non-Christians. Of equal interest is the remark that speech, while gracious, should be "seasoned with salt." William Barclay interprets this as: "The Christian must have charm and wit in his speech so that he may know how to give the right answer in every case." Christianity need not and should not be dull.

R&D How would you carry on the work of Christ in an openly hostile environment?

Prayer: Lord, we are grateful for prayer groups in which we can affirm, encourage, and guide one another.

Thursday, October 26

Read: Colossians 4:7-18

Personal Greetings

The closing of the epistle gives us a snapshot of the personal character of the early Christian communities. Paul has argued earlier in the letter that all people are united in Christ; that the previously existing divisions between Greek and Jew, slave and free, have been broken down in Christ. This does not mean that there are not special relationships or natural ties between Christian peo-

ple. Such relationships are, in fact, intensified because of the love of Christ shared between them.

Epaphras, a native of Colossae, has quite properly a special affection and concern for the Colossian church (v.12). Paul believes that it is important that the Christian churches should have personal news of one another (vv.7-9). Christian love needs to combine universality of scope with the real, genuine concern of natural care and affection. This is something that was perhaps more easily achieved in Paul's day than in the impersonal society in which most of us live today.

Many congregations find this balance in small prayer and Bible study groups; the larger body of the church is together for worship services and the sharing of the universal work of the church, while the intimacy and accountability obvious in the early church are experienced in the small groups.

R&D How does your church embody universal scope and personal care?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord God, that it is in small groups that we can speak from the "top of our heads" and the "bottom of our hearts" without fear of rejection or misunderstanding.



1 and 2 Kings

Soloman, Elijah, and Elisha

Friday, October 27

Read: 1 Kings 1:11-27

Introduction

The focus of this study is the lives of Solomon, Elijah, and Elisha as told in the books of 1 and 2 Kings. The books of 1 and 2 Kings were written to instruct and encourage the Jews who had witnessed the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. Throughout these two books the authors seek to demonstrate that catastrophe has overtaken Israel because of the infidelity of its kings and people to the covenant between God and Israel, not because of any lack of faithfulness on God's part.

A second emphasis is that once the word of God has gone forth through His prophets it is *infallibly* fulfilled. This includes the promise made to David that his dynasty would be eternal (2 Samuel 7) will be fulfilled. A third emphasis throughout both books is that God is the chief protagonist.

However, our focus will not be on these points which reveal aspects of the character of God but will instead focus on the personalities and characters of Solomon, Elijah, and Elisha. We will be studying passages which help us understand each one and what their lives tell us about how God would have us live our lives. Because of the vast amount of detail in the two books and the need for brevity of this study, we will not cover all the material provided in 1 and 2 Kings in which the stories of Solomon, Elijah, and Elisha are told. If your Bible has titles or outline headings introducing each story it will be helpful to skim those titles today to obtain an overview of God's story in these books.

Let us begin our study by looking at the meaning of the names of each of these three men. Solomon is given two names in the Bible. The first name, given to him by God through the proph-

et Nathan, is Jedidiah which means “loved of Yahweh.” Solomon, the name which is invariably used in referring to him, is derived from the Hebrew word for peace. The meaning of Elijah’s name is “God is Yahweh.” Elisha’s name means “God is salvation.”

R&D *What do the names of Solomon, Elijah, and Elisha tell us about God?*

Prayer: *Guide us through this Old Testament study, Lord, to see the messages You have in it for us.*

Saturday, October 28

Read: 1 Kings 1:28-40

The Chosen One

In the verses that precede those we are studying today the authors of 1 Kings have told of the plot of Adonijah, David’s eldest living son, to seize the throne. Reminded by Bathsheba, Solomon’s mother, and Nathan of his promise to declare Solomon his successor, David honors his promise. His instruction to set Solomon on his own mule was intended to visually and dramatically demonstrate that he was actually turning all his authority over to Solomon.

For the first time in Israel’s history the king designates his heir to succeed him. Both Saul and David had been designated by God to lead the people and had been anointed through His prophets at His direction (1 Samuel 9:15 and 10:1; and 16:1-13). Bathsheba’s proclamation, “May my lord King David live forever” (1 Kings 1:31b), envisages perpetual life for the Davidic line through Solomon, not David’s perpetual life.

Benaiah’s response, verses 36-37, to King David’s instruction to anoint Solomon king is intended to remind King David (and the reader) that God must confirm what David says or it will have no effect. The security of Solomon’s throne and the greatness of his kingdom are dependent on God’s blessing. This underscores the point that even though Solomon was chosen by David to be his successor, it was the Lord God who is at work to frustrate Adonijah and to establish Solomon as king. Nonetheless, the transformation of Israel’s kingship from that of a charismatic leader chosen and empowered by God to a hereditary kingship chosen by man is a

significant sign that God's people are beginning to conform to the ways of the world.

R&D *How does having a strong and devoted mother affect one's personality?*

Prayer: *Thank You for providing us, through Your Book, a history of Your plan that ultimately led to the Messiah Jesus.*

Sunday, October 29

Sabbath Time

"But woe to you Pharisees! for you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others." Luke 11:42

The end of devotion is not to become extraordinarily devout. It is possible to fill one's life with practices of piety, and yet not to get more Christlike. It is possible to spend much time in devotion, and yet to be hard and critical and to lack a missionary and loving spirit. It is a terrible, as well as a salutary, thing to remember that it was devout people at a time of special devotion who killed our Lord.

Monday, October 30

Read: 1 Kings 2:1-10, 26-46

David's Final Request

In verses 1-10 we read David's final charge to his son, Solomon. Solomon is reminded that his success as king and God's promise that the Davidic line will continue on the throne of Israel are dependent on his walking in the ways of Yahweh and keeping His commandments. David's final charge to Solomon is to punish Joab and Shimei for what they have done to him. These requests may seem strange to us, especially the request to punish Shimei when David himself has seemingly assured his safety in promising that he will not put him to death by the sword.

It is important for us to understand that the guilt for crimes done to people for whom David was responsible was viewed as having been done by him. Thus, the guilt for Joab's killing of Abner who was under David's safe conduct (2 Samuel 23ff), and Amasa who was serving in his army (2 Samuel 20:8ff), if not

avenged would hang over and menace Solomon's reign. The curse with which Shimei cursed David (2 Samuel 16:5ff) also threatens the house of David as long as he lives. David's promise to Shimei not to kill him, *himself*, in response to his pleas for forgiveness (2 Samuel 19:16ff) was not considered to have obviated the effectiveness of the curse.

Through carrying out David's final request by the killing of Joab and Shimei (and the killing of Adonijah), Solomon secured his throne and his kingdom was established.

R&D How do we reconcile the treachery we see in the Old Testament with the way God would have Christian leaders function today?

Prayer: Thank You, Father God, that, in Christ, You give us Your picture of love and forgiveness.

Tuesday, October 31

Read: 1 Kings 3:3-15

A Prayer for Wisdom

In Solomon's dream at Gibeon (the location of the tent of the meeting, 2 Chronicles 1:3), God appears to him and says, "Ask what I shall give you." Solomon may ask for whatever he desires because all things are in God's power to give.

Before asking for anything, Solomon acknowledges that it is God who has made him king and then prays that God will give him that which he needs to carry out the responsibility given him. He recognizes his own insufficiency. His request for an understanding mind to govern God's people and to discern good and evil is pleasing to God because it is not a selfish prayer. It is a request for a gift which will benefit His (God's) people. Because his prayer is pleasing to God, God gives Solomon not only what he has asked for but much more besides.

God has given us the responsibility to proclaim the gospel, to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to welcome the stranger, to clothe the naked, to visit the sick and the prisoner. In our society we are encouraged to be self-reliant. Often, we have erroneously been told that "God helps those who help themselves." Instead, we, like Solomon, are to recognize our own insufficiency

and ask for the gifts we need to accomplish the tasks God calls us to do. Jesus has given us the answer, for he has said, “Ask, and it will be given you” (Matthew 7:7-8, Luke 11:9-15). “And this is the confidence which we have in (Jesus), that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him” (1 John 4:14-15).

R&D *What gift(s) of the Holy Spirit (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4) has God given you in order to serve Him effectively?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord God, that You will give us the gifts we need to carry out Your plans for our lives.*

Wednesday, November 1

Read: 1 Kings 6:1, 38, 8:22-30, 52-61

The Temple

Solomon builds the temple in fulfillment of God’s promise (1 Chronicles 17:11-12). He had knelt before God and the people to dedicate the temple (v.54), thus demonstrating to the people that the Lord is a God before whom even kings must kneel.

In his prayer of dedication Solomon emphasizes God’s faithfulness, His transcendence and His love. He then entreats God to hear the prayers of His chosen people when they pray toward the temple of which God has said, “My name shall be there” (8:29). Although Solomon acknowledges that God cannot be contained in a worldly dwelling, it is still clear that God is present in the temple in a special way. This was evidenced by the cloud representing the glory of the Lord which filled the inner sanctuary of the temple when the ark of the covenant was brought into it (8:6-11).

Solomon’s final prayer entreats God to continue to be with His people, to incline their hearts to keep His commandments, and to “maintain the cause of his servant (Solomon) and the cause of his people Israel...; that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God; there is no other” (8:59b- 60). In one sense, the concept of God’s special presence in the temple continues in the awareness we often have that God is present in a special way in our church buildings. Is He, or is it simply that *we* are more

aware of His presence when we are in a building dedicated to His worship and hallowed by the prayers of the faithful?

R&D *Where do you feel closest to God? Are your prayers more effective when you pray in a “holy place”?*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, that we have places of worship where we can gather to be with You in a special way.*

Thursday, November 2

Read: 1 Kings 5:5, 13-14, 7:1-8, 9:15-22

A Great Builder

These verses record Solomon’s building projects and reveal that in order to accomplish his grand schemes it was necessary for him to impose forced labor on the people of Israel and to enslave the descendants of the original people who had inhabited the land. Were we to read 1 Kings 4-9 in its entirety we would find that these chapters focus on Solomon’s organizational skills and on his ambitious building projects. We may admire Solomon’s energy, his ambition, and his organizational skills but we need to examine the cost of these projects for the people.

In the history of the world great structures have been built in many countries for many different purposes, often with slave labor and often with funds that could have been better spent for the benefit of all. Perhaps today’s readings will give us pause concerning the use of government funds in our own country in our own day. Not all construction is to the glory of God.

R&D *How does Solomon’s model of kingship compare with the model given to us by Jesus (Luke 13:1-18)?*

Prayer: *Help us, Lord, to be wise in Your eyes.*

Friday, November 3

Read: 1 Kings 4:22-28, 10:14-27

Wealth and Might

These verses reveal the wealth of Solomon and the provisions necessary for the daily operation of his court. Wealth and prosperity were viewed as a sign of wisdom. Solomon’s wealth and

the luxury and display of his court increasingly set him apart from (above?) his people.

Solomon built an army based on the most modern weapons, chariots, and stationed them at significant defensive points to secure his kingdom. In this he displays worldly wisdom. In today's terms he would be a "hawk" rather than a "dove." The psalmist writes, "The king is not saved by a mighty army; a warrior is not saved by his great strength; a horse is a false hope for victory" (Psalm 33:16-17a).

Today many believe that to be safe, to be secure, we must be sure that we have sufficient wealth to meet our needs. Insurance policies are purchased hoping they will meet the needs of our family or business in times of disaster, accident, or illness. Guns are bought for protection or the sense of security they may give. We put ever stronger locks on our doors.

We who write these words had lived in Namibia in Southwest Africa for two and one-half years, where most of the white population lived in a world of paranoia and with a siege mentality. The Anglican Church in Namibia is a part of the Province of Southern Africa, a province beset with violence. At the 1992 Provincial Synod, the Church voted to become a "Peace Church" and proclaimed that Anglicans should not carry any type of weapon at any time. In so doing, the Church made a statement that we are to place our trust in God alone.

R&D How important is it for our country to be strong militarily?

Prayer: Guide our nation's leaders in the critical decisions they face, Lord.

Saturday, November 4

Read: 1 Kings 3:1, 11:1-8

Foreign Wives

It appears that many of Solomon's marriages with foreign women, and certainly the marriage to Pharaoh's daughter, were contracted to form alliances with neighboring states. Polygamy was not uncommon in Old Testament times and a large harem was a sign of Solomon's wealth and power as king. David himself had

at least seven wives and ten concubines, but just as he did in most everything else, Solomon surpassed all previous leaders of Israel in the size of his harem.

Foreign wives were not uncommon even though marrying foreign women was against God's commandments (Deuteronomy 7:3-4), and prior to Solomon there is no indication that foreign wives were allowed to build shrines to their gods in Israel. In building shrines for his wives in which they could worship their gods, Solomon was probably seeking to make them feel at home and perhaps to give honor to the countries or peoples from which they came. However, these verses reveal that over time Solomon himself began to participate with his wives in their religious observances. Solomon's marriages to foreign women and his accommodation of their religions not only had the result of turning his heart away from the Lord, the God of Israel, but it also deflected his people from their destiny to be a "peculiar people" belonging specially to God and separated from all other peoples and set the scene for many of Israel's future disasters.

R&D To what extent are there any parallels between Solomon's accommodation of his wives' religions and our attitude as Christians today toward other faiths?

Prayer: While we try to be loving to all people, Lord, help us remember that the most loving thing we can do is lead them to Christ.

Sunday, November 5

Sabbath Time

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

What are we here for? We are here for exactly the same reason that our Lord was in this world. He has revealed in His life what human life is for. It is for the fulfillment of a perfect sonship. Our Lord has revealed to us the Father; we are in our measure to reveal the Christ. Our Lord bore the world's burden revealing His Father as the everlasting Love. We are, in bearing one another's burdens, revealing the everlasting brotherhood in Christ.

Read: 1 Kings 16:29—17:1, 18:16-18

God's Messenger

Following Solomon's death, there was a division of the kingdom. Rehoboam, Solomon's son, became king; but, he rejected wise counsel and attempted to impose heavy taxes on an already overburdened nation. As a result, the ten northern tribes revolted and chose Jeroboam (a civil servant under Solomon, who had attempted rebellion during Solomon's lifetime, and escaped to Egypt when it failed) as their king. The two southern tribes of Benjamin and Judah remained loyal to the house of David and formed the kingdom of Judah, including Jerusalem and other large cities.

Now, some years later, in the northern kingdom, we encounter one of the Bible's most majestic figures, the prophet Elijah. Ahab is the sixth king since Jeroboam, and he was apparently an able administrator despite his moral shortcomings. But the kings of Israel were to reign under the Lordship of God, and thus were judged in Scripture primarily on their faithfulness and obedience to Him.

In these verses we read of Ahab's apostasy and God's response. Baal was the god of the storm, the god of fertility, who was believed to be present in the rain and the dew. Elijah is identified as coming from Gilead, a wild unsettled area. Throughout his ministry, Elijah is portrayed as a man of the wilderness, of the desert. He identifies himself as an obedient minister (servant) of the God of Israel and declares that the God of Israel lives and will bring a drought upon the land. Then, only the word of the prophet inspired and empowered by God can bring it to an end and Baal, the god of rain, will be powerless.

After three years of drought, when Elijah again confronts Ahab, Ahab accuses Elijah of causing the drought. The prophet must once again point out that Ahab has brought disaster on himself and his people through his own apostasy.

R&D Have you ever blamed God for troubles you brought on yourself?

Prayer: *There are consequences to our actions, Lord. May we always look to the Holy Spirit within us to guide us in times of decision.*

Tuesday, November 7

Read: 1 Kings 17:2-6

Trust in God's Provision

Having referred to Elijah as one of the majestic figures in the Bible, let us not judge him too hastily as he runs for cover. He is, after all, an outsider (Gilead is over on the eastern side of the Jordan) who has confronted a king. What makes him so appealing is that, by the power of God, he is a commanding (even monumental) character; yet he is also very human, even fragile.

Elijah follows God's instructions to go east of the Jordan—outside of the Promised Land—trusting that God will meet his needs as He had provided for His people in the desert in the time of Moses. He is to hide by a watercourse named Cherith, from which he could drink. His food is to be supplied by *crybym*, which read one way means ravens and pronounced another way means Arabs (or, more specifically, Bedouins, nomads of the desert area).

Both ravens and people of the desert have the reputation of being scavengers, not providers. Thus, to believe that he would be taken care of in this manner was a supreme act of faith on the part of Elijah.

These verses reveal that the God of Israel is not simply the God of a specific country. He is the one true God who can provide for His people wherever they may be, *if* they trust Him to keep His promises. His miraculous provision for His prophet Elijah is a sign of His power, to be demonstrated in even greater measure in the passages that follow.

R&D *In what miraculous way has God met your needs?*

Prayer: *Blessed Lord, thank You for meeting our needs, sometimes in the simplest ways and sometimes in amazing ways.*

Read: 1 Kings 17:7-16

Elijah Inspires Faith

When the brook dried up God did not miraculously provide water for his prophet. Instead, Elijah was instructed to go to Zarephath near Sidon in Phoenicia, the stronghold of Baal whom Jezebel worshiped, and was assured that God would provide for him there through a widow (although widows in that day were among the poorest of the poor). Again, Elijah trusts in God and does His bidding.

The drought has struck Phoenicia as well. The God of Israel has shut up Baal's heavens. Encountering the widow, Elijah asks her for bread. Her reply implies that she believes Elijah's God is a god who lives (according to an early Phoenician myth when drought is upon the land Baal is dead), but that He is God of the people of Israel alone.

Elijah in his reply also identifies his God as the God of Israel but proclaims that nonetheless God had promised that if she would provide food for Elijah her own supplies will not be exhausted until the drought ended. The widow, inspired by Elijah's words to trust in God, prepares the bread he has requested, and her faith is honored. Not only does God provide for His prophet, He provides for her and for her son as well. He is not a God who provides only for the people of Israel but is *the* God who will provide for all who trust in Him.

It is interesting, at this point, to think of Elijah as a forerunner of Jesus. Here is a man who obviously inspires confidence in the lowly while being a threat to "the powers that be."

R&D *Who has inspired you to trust in God? What were the circumstances?*

Prayer: *Blessed Lord, it is as we let the light of Christ shine forth in our lives that others may see You.*

Thursday, November 9

Read: 1 Kings 17:17-24

God's Love Shown

Suddenly, the confidence shown in Elijah as a man of God is called into serious question. As we have seen, in ancient Middle Eastern societies the situation of a widow was desperate. It was even more desperate if she had no son. When the widow's son dies, grief-stricken, she blames Elijah. According to her understanding, it is Elijah's presence in her home which has caused God to notice her and to punish her for her unnamed sins by bringing about the death of her son. Without the prophet's presence in her home, her sins might have escaped God's notice and gone unpunished.

The boldness of Elijah's prayer (v.20) is worth noting. Like Naomi (Ruth 1:21) and Job, Elijah protests what he interprets to be the unjust action of God. Through Elijah's prayers the widow's son is restored to life, thus demonstrating that the God of Israel is a God of life not of death, a God who loves her even though she is a sinner. Her service to His prophet will bring life not death to her home. Lying on the boy's body three times acts out the prayer that his lifeless body will be as full of life as the body of the prophet. This story is an illustration of the role of God's prophets as mediators of God's lifegiving power.

R&D *In what ways in the past have you tried to avoid God's notice?*

Prayer: *You knew me in my mother's womb, Lord. There is no escaping You; but, by Your grace, it is Your desire to love us and forgive us rather than accusing and punishing us.*

Friday, November 10

Read: 1 Kings 18:20-39

Prophets Challenge

These verses reveal Elijah's boldness and his faith in God. The people of Israel, following the example of their king, have been hedging their bets. They have not abandoned the worship of the God of Israel but they have begun worshipping Baal as well.

Elijah challenges them, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal,

follow him,” There is no response. He then challenges the prophets of Baal to a contest. The only God who is God is a God who acts. Will Baal answer the prayers of his prophets? They believed he would, or they would not have accepted Elijah’s challenge.

Elijah was willing to risk everything trusting that God would act and thus cause Israel to turn away from the worship of false gods. Through his action God reveals His power. He reveals Himself as a God who is present, who never abandons His people. When the fire of the Lord fell, consuming the offering, the wood, the stones of the altar and even the water in the trench surrounding the altar, the people believed, fell on their faces, and worshiped God.

R&D *Do we need “signs and wonders” today to lead us to true faith in our God?*

Prayer: *Lord, You are performing signs and wonders all around us every day if we just have the eyes of faith to see them.*

Saturday, November 11

Read: 1 Kings 18:41-46

The Drought Ends

The people have turned their hearts to God. God will now bless the land. Elijah tells King Ahab to end his fast, prophesying an end to the drought even though there is not a cloud in the sky.

Elijah climbs to the very summit of Mount Carmel, and crouches in a profound prayer of supplication. God has revealed that rain will come but the prophet recognizes that action on his part is required. In 17:1, Elijah had told King Ahab, “There shall be neither dew nor rain these years except by my (God’s) word.”

We can readily see in this text that it is the prayer of Elijah which constitutes the “word” or the means by which God causes the rain to come. Elijah is persistent in his prayer. Seven times he sends his servant to look for a sign of rain. The number seven is significant for in the Bible seven signifies completion and perfection. The seventh time Elijah prays and sends his servant to look toward the sea and the servant returns and reports a small cloud (“a little cloud like a man’s hand”) on the horizon.

Elijah, recognizing the small cloud as God's answer to his prayer for rain, does not wait for more clouds to gather, but immediately sends his servant to warn Ahab that the rain is coming. It would appear that Ahab doubts that rain will come for the story reports that the rain came before Ahab rode in his chariot to Jezreel.

R&D *What is the role of prayer in effecting God's promises to us?*

Prayer: *We marvel at all the technological wonders in our world today, Lord; but there is no comparison between them and the direct connection with You through prayer.*

Sunday, November 12

Sabbath Time

And to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Ephesians 3:19

It is one thing to know about God; it is another thing to know Him. It is one thing to go to religious occasions; it is another thing to go to God Himself.

Monday, November 13

Read: 1 Kings 18:48—19:8

From Joy to Despair

In these verses we see a man of strong emotion, a real man. All he does and all he feels looms large. Elijah has been victorious over the prophets of Baal. The people of Israel have acknowledged that the Lord is God.

In answer to Elijah's prayer, rain has come; the drought has ended. In the first verse of today's reading, we see the prophet, filled with the Holy Spirit and with joy, running before the Lord. But his joy soon turns to despair, his faith to fear. Threatened by Jezebel with death, Elijah runs away. He dismisses his servant at Beersheba, the southern border of Israel, as a sign he is abandoning his ministry and flees into the wilderness. Believing he has failed, he prays to die.

Where is the bold man who challenged the prophets of Baal? Where is the man of faith who believed God would bring rain in answer to his prayer? In life, times of elation are often followed by

times of depression, times of faith by times of doubt; for Satan is most relentless in attacking those who manifest the greatest faith in the Lord. In the wilderness God once again miraculously provides for his prophet. After he has rested and been refreshed Elijah rises and continues deeper into the wilderness but now he has a destination, Mount Horeb (Mount Sinai), God's holy mountain.

R&D Have you ever experienced a time of great discouragement after being used by God in a special way? How did God refresh and strengthen you?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord God, that You are with us in times of elation and in times of disappointment; You love us in all situations.

Tuesday, November 14

Read: 1 Kings 19:9-18

Answer to Discouragement

As Elijah retreats to a cave in the holy mountain, God challenges him, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" The question might be phrased, "Why have you abandoned the mission I called you to fulfill?" Elijah's answer reveals his discouragement, his sense of futility and failure. He believed that he was completely alone in standing for God against the false beliefs of the age.

Have you ever felt alone as you stood firmly for God's truth, for His call to holy living, or as you proclaimed that Jesus is *the* way to the Father? God does not immediately address Elijah's complaints but calls him to come out of hiding and stand before Him. Previously God has revealed His power in Elijah's life in dramatic ways and it may be correct to assume that Elijah was expecting another dramatic sign of God's power; but this time God did not work through signs and wonders but through a gentle breeze.

Again, God asks Elijah why he has run away. Again, Elijah voices his complaints against the people. God does not say he is wrong, for indeed much of what Elijah believes is true. God simply gives him new marching orders and—as part of those orders—assures him that there are some (7,000) who remain true to Him.

God's instructions indicate that He will use Hazeel, Jehu, and Elisha to complete the mission given to Elijah to recall the

people of Israel to their covenant relationship with God. The circumstances which caused Elijah's flight have not changed; but strengthened, encouraged, and given new marching orders, Elijah goes forth. Once again, we see him boldly stepping out to do God's will.

R&D What can I do so that I will be able to hear God's voice in my times of discouragement?

Prayer: Lord, Your answers to our prayers sometimes come in unexpected ways; help us to perceive Your will for us in all situations.

Wednesday, November 15

Read: 1 Kings 19:19-21; 2 Kings 2:1-16

Call/Response

In these verses we read of Elisha's response to God's call. It appears that Elisha was the son of a rich farmer. Knowing that the prophet's mantle was a symbol of his office, Elisha recognizes that he is being called to succeed Elijah.

He appears to be more than willing to follow Elijah, as might be the case with you or with me, but his first thought is to say farewell to his family. Elijah's response indicates that Elisha must make a choice between accepting God's call or remaining tied to his family and the things of this world. It is reminiscent of Jesus' words in response to the man who said he wanted to follow him but first he must say farewell to his family: "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62).

Elisha does not return home but slaughters his oxen, chops up their yokes and, with them, prepares a sacrificial feast, thus demonstrating the renunciation of his former life for his new vocation. Elisha becomes Elijah's servant and disciple. As Elijah nears his death it appears that he is reluctant to pass the burdens of the prophetic ministry on to his son in the faith. Three times he asks him to remain behind. Three times Elisha refuses.

In requesting a double share of Elijah's spirit, Elisha is requesting the traditional inheritance of an eldest son. He is asking to be recognized as the principal spiritual heir of Elijah. Elijah's

response reveals his awareness that the gift is not his to give, but God's. The following events reveal that Elisha is Elijah's spiritual heir. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book *The Cost of Discipleship*, challenges us by writing that when Jesus calls us he calls us to come and die.

R&D *Are you willing to pay the price of responding to God's call to follow Him?*

Prayer: *Life in you, Christ Jesus, is worth any price.*

Thursday, November 16

Read: 2 Kings 2:19-22, 4:38-41

Demonstrating God's Love I

Through the miracles we will consider in this lesson and the next, Elisha is revealed as a man filled with the love that God has for His people. He reflects the character of God who is loving and compassionate. In today's verses Elijah reveals God's ability to transform that which brings death into that which gives life.

It is the Lord God, through His servant Elisha, who transforms the bad water which causes the land to be unfruitful into life-giving water. In the miracle of the poison pottage, it might look as if it is Elisha, not God, who transforms the pottage from that which brings death to that which sustains life; but it is important to note that Elisha is identified by the sons of the prophets as a man of God. Again, it is God's power working through His servant which brings life.

We do not know what caused the spring to be bad. The stew was poisonous because of poisonous gourds which had been inadvertently added to it. A mistake on the part of one of the company almost brought death to his fellows but God eradicated the results of his actions. The sin committed by Adam and Eve in eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil brought death but God, through Jesus, has eradicated the results of sin (Adam's and ours) so that, sustained through his life-giving body and blood, we might live.

R&D *To what extent do you experience new life and strength as you partake of Jesus' body and blood in Holy Communion?*

Prayer: *Good health is a precious gift, Lord. Help us not to forget all that You have done and do to protect us in so many ways.*

Friday, November 17

Read: 2 Kings 4:1-7, 42-44

Demonstrating God's Love II

In the miracles we consider today, we see God's love demonstrated once again. We also learn that God works with what we have. The woman in the first story is described as a widow of one of the sons of the prophets but it is clear that the community did not follow God's injunction to provide for her. The community's failure to minister to this sister in love brought her to dire straits. Her children are about to be taken as slaves to pay her debt.

She has only one jar of oil; what can God do with that? The situation seems hopeless but when offered to God, the jar of oil becomes the vehicle through which her needs are met.

The second miracle is reminiscent of Jesus' multiplication of the loaves and fishes (Mark 6:30-44), but here we should note that the gift brought to Elisha was the *first fruits*, the tithe. We can assume that the famine afflicting the land also affected this farmer, but even though he might have been justified in feeling that he needed all the fruits of his harvest and had none to spare, he responded to God's call to give the first fruits to Him. Through his gift, God's servants were fed.

R&D *To what extent do you believe that God will continue to provide for you if you give to Him a tenth (tithe) from what He has already so generously provided to you?*

Prayer: *The joy of sharing with others is just one of the many ways in which you desire us to live in your image, Lord Jesus.*

Saturday, November 18

Read: 2 Kings 3:11-20, 6:8-10, 33—7:2

Advisor

In this story we see the king of Israel, Joram, a son of Ahab, seeking advice from Elisha. Joram has apparently turned aside from the worship of Baal but not from the syncretistic worship

of Jeroboam (1 Kings 12:25-33). He does not worship the Lord with his whole heart; but when he learns that Elisha was a disciple of Elijah, he recognizes Elisha as a man of God. Together with his allies, the kings of Judah and Edom, he seeks the advice of the prophet.

Viewing Joram as an apostate, Elisha does not want to respond to his request and, indeed, he does so only for the sake of Jehoshaphat and only after being assured that it is the Lord who has called the kings together to do battle against Moab. In the second section, Elisha warns the king of ambushes set by the king of Syria and in the third, he prophesies both Israel's miraculous victory and Joram's death for his continued failure to believe in the power of the Lord. Elisha was not only a friend of the poor and needy but an advisor to kings as well.

R&D *What role do you believe religious leaders should take in politics?*

Prayer: *Our allegiance is owed only to You, Lord God.*

Sunday, November 19

Sabbath Time

But set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. 1 Timothy 4:12b

It is not much use pointing others to a road along which we ourselves do not propose to go. We can show people the way best by going along it. We can tell of its difficulties only by the honesty of our own experience. We are to be pilgrims, not signposts.

Monday, November 20

Read: 2 Kings 11:1-17

A Healer

Naaman is desperate for healing. He is willing to grasp at any straw. He is even willing to follow the suggestion of a lowly slave girl.

Elisha does not go out to Naaman but simply sends a messenger to instruct him in what he must do to effect his healing. It has been suggested that Elisha was simply standing on his dignity as a prophet of the Lord in not going out to the pagan commander. Was he, or did he remain inside the house to demonstrate that God

could heal through him without his physical presence? Whatever his reason, Naaman took the prophet's action and his instruction to bathe in the muddy Jordan River as an insult; but his desire for healing overcame his hurt pride and he did follow the prophet's instructions. He was healed and the Lord was revealed as a God whose power to heal extends even to those who do not worship Him, even to those who persecute His people.

It is through his healing that Naaman becomes a follower of the Lord. Elisha's action points to Jesus' injunction, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). The story also reveals that Elisha was truly a servant of God, motivated to glorify God, not to enrich himself.

R&D Should we limit our caring and healing ministries only to those who believe in God?

Prayer: *You love everyone, Lord God, and we are to love them as well.*

Tuesday, November 21

Read: 2 Kings 6:11-23

God, Protector and Deliverer

Elisha's servant, seeing that he and Elisha are surrounded by a mighty army, reacts with fear. His reaction to seeing the horses and chariots was the same as ours would be if we awoke one morning and found ourselves surrounded by tanks and rocket launchers.

Unlike his fearful servant, Elisha sees with the eyes of faith. The psalmist writes, "The army of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them" (Psalm 34:7). Elisha knows it is true. He prays that God will open his servant's eyes, give him eyes of faith, that he might see. He then prays that the enemy will be blinded.

Jesus asserted that God sent him "to proclaim release to the captives *and recovering of sight to the blind*" (Luke 4:18). Those who are unable to see the truth have been blinded by the god of this world, Satan (2 Corinthians 4:4), and God alone has the power to restore their sight. Having brought the blinded army, which is now dependent on him for guidance before the king of Israel, Elisha prays that God will restore their sight. He encourages the king

to be merciful and the soldiers are sent on their way. The Syrians, having experienced both the power of the God of Israel and His mercy, refrain from attacking. There is a brief respite from war.

In the midst of a war, would you advise the commander in chief to release captured enemy forces? We can only show God's mercy to our enemies if we believe in God's power to protect us, if we can see the mighty forces of God arrayed to protect us. The psalmist points to the true source of security: "Some boast of chariots and some of horses; but we boast in the name of the Lord our God" (Psalm 20:7).

R&D Is there anything we can do to improve our "spiritual" vision so that we can "boast in the name of the Lord" for our protection?

Prayer: Blessed God, until all nations are brought to serve You, we will not have peace. We need a great movement of the Holy Spirit upon this earth that leads all nations to Christ.

Wednesday, November 22

Read: 2 Kings 8:7-15, 9:1-7

Fulfilling Elijah's Ministry

Earlier in this study we have seen Solomon fulfill the desire of his father David to build a temple for the Lord. God had told Elijah that he would anoint Hazael king over Syria and Jehu, king over Israel. But it was not Elijah but Elisha who fulfilled those commissions.

Elisha is in tears as he proclaims to Hazael that he will be king because he is aware of the devastation Hazael will bring upon Israel; nonetheless, he fulfills God's commission. In the anointing of Jehu the old custom of the selection of a king by a prophet who speaks in God's name is revived. Both kings will be used by God to punish Israel and the house of Ahab for their apostasy.

Because our concept of time is different from God's, it sometimes seems that His promises are not being fulfilled. Evil often appears triumphant; but if we believe God's word as revealed in Scripture, we know the end of the story. God is a just God. Evil will be destroyed and God's kingdom will be established. If the

work God has called us to do is not completed in our lifetime, it will be completed by those who follow.

R&D God has promised that whenever we pray in His name according to His will, our prayers will be answered. How can we believe this promise when it appears that our prayers are not being answered?

Prayer: *Lord, Your answers to our prayers are sometimes, "Later" or "Here's another way." Help us to be faithful in our impatience.*

Thursday, November 23

Conclusion

We have looked at the lives of Solomon, Elijah, and Elisha. Solomon began his reign by recognizing his own insufficiency. His humble prayer that he be given wisdom to govern wisely was answered. Because God was pleased with his request, he was also granted riches and honor.

By worldly standards Solomon is perhaps the most successful of all Israel's kings. Under Solomon, Israel became a major power in the region. The temple built for the Lord of Israel in Jerusalem proclaimed to the world that the God of Israel was a great God. The magnificence of Solomon's palace, his wealth, the size of his harem *and* the size of his army witnessed to the world that he was a great king. It appears, however, that Solomon's success as king was based on worldly wisdom rather than the true wisdom which calls us to rely on God.

Elijah is a fiery man of God. A man of the wilderness. The primary focus of his ministry is to call the king and people of Israel to turn away from their false gods and to worship the Lord, the true God of Israel. Through him, God's power is made manifest and also God's love for all people. Elijah is a man who experiences the heights of religious ecstasy and the depths of despondency. In ministering to Elijah in his time of despair, God reveals Himself as a God who speaks in a whisper as well as through mighty signs and wonders.

Elisha demonstrates God's love for all people. Unlike Elijah, he is most often portrayed as living in community. Kings and commoners alike come to him with their needs. But Elisha,

like Elijah, is used not only as a channel of God's love, but also as an instrument of God's judgment. He grieves as he fulfills God's call to Elijah to anoint the kings who will be used to discipline God's people, but he fulfills it nonetheless.

R&D In what ways do you identify with Solomon, with Elijah, with Elisha? What does the study of their lives reveal about how God would have us live our lives?

Prayer: You gift different people in different ways to fulfill Your will, O Lord. Use us also to Your glory.



Jesus Reveals

Friday, November 24

Read: John 8:12-20

Light

Picture yourself in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus. On the evening of the first day of the Festival of Tabernacles, one of the primary festivals of the Jewish people, there was a ceremony called “The Illumination of the Temple.” It took place in the Court of the Women, which was surrounded by galleries for spectators. In the center, four great candelabra were set ablaze when darkness came, and the night was spent in singing psalms of joy and praise.

Into this setting comes Jesus saying, “I am the light of the world. For the person who follows me, there will be light, not just for one glorious evening but for the whole of his or her life here on earth and for eternity. The candelabra in the temple will burn out, but I am the light that will last forever.”

Images of light. That which shows us the way, helps us to see clearly where we are to go. That which illuminates the dark corners of the world, helping us to see things as they really are and to get them into perspective. That which also exposes the darkness within us, forcing us to deal with ourselves in repentance and forgiveness.

Jesus said, “He who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” The term “light of life” can have two meanings in the Greek: the light that issues from the source of life or the light that gives life. Here, it means both. Jesus is the light of God who has come among us; but he is also the light who gives us life. As William Barclay has said, “Just as a flower can never blossom when it never sees the sunlight, so our lives can never flower with the grace and beauty they ought to have until they are irradiated with the light of the presence of Jesus.”

R&D *To what area of darkness in your life does Jesus need to bring light today?*

Prayer: *Lord, we pray that You not only expose the darkness within us but, at the same time, fill us with the light of Christ.*

Saturday, November 25

Read: John 6:35-51

Bread

Picture yourself as one of the starving in an area of the world where, as we often on our television sets, famine and violence have led to despair. Just as you are about to give up, relief arrives on the scene.

Maybe we have to be that hungry spiritually to realize what it meant for Jesus to say, "I am the bread of life." Otherwise, it is too easy to pass this off as simply a beautiful, somewhat mystical phrase. What does it really mean?

We know that bread sustains life; without it we cannot live. But what is living all about? Surely it is meant to be more than simply physical existence; even most non-Christians realize this.

There is a spiritual meaning to life that far exceeds the physical in terms of eternal significance. Real life is being in relationship with God, having a sense of purpose, and trying to live in accordance with that purpose which God has for us. That relationship is made possible only through Jesus Christ.

Without Jesus, there may be existence, but not life. Acceptance of Jesus as Lord and Savior is essential to life; that is to say, he is the bread of life. As St. Augustine has reminded us, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. The hunger of the human situation can only be satisfied by knowledge of Christ and, through him, knowledge of God.

R&D *What is "real life" for you?*

Prayer: *You sustain us in so many ways, Lord God; but the bread of life that is Jesus Christ is Your ultimate gift.*

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

As soon as we cease to desire, we cease to be truly alive. Life is meant to be a desiring thing. We are meant to be passionate, but the passion of our souls is to flow in God's channels, not the devil's. There is nothing so thrilling as the quest of holiness, there is nothing so dull as sin.

Monday, November 27

Read: John 10:1-10

Door

It is a basic principle that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. However, we can seldom walk or drive from one place to another without following a path that is far from straight. And, ultimately, there is a door we must go through to get to our destination.

What is true of our physical life is also true of our spiritual. To reach the "place" God wants us to be, we have a path to follow and a "door" through which to enter. That door is Jesus Christ.

When Jesus used the metaphor of being the door, he had a particular situation in mind. His imagery is tied, in this passage from the Gospel of John, to the vocation of the shepherd. In Jesus' time on earth, the shepherd was the "door" for his sheep in a special way. At night the sheep were placed in an enclosure with an opening in which the shepherd himself slept so that nothing could pass in or out without going over his body. In the most literal sense, the shepherd was the door.

What Jesus was saying was that, through him and through him alone, we have access to God (see Ephesians 2:18). This, of course, is good news indeed. It is the way of relationship with God and the freedom and joy that come from that relationship. But, in addition to that, Jesus is showing us that it is also the way to real security.

With the Good Shepherd as our door, we know that we have his protection. We can "go in and come out" in safety. There are few messages more clearly or more often spoken in Scripture than "be not afraid." Certainly we face crises in life; but, as a friend

recently facing a possible death sentence from cancer said, “Just read Psalm 16 and know that, despite anything that might happen, we are in God’s hands, and nothing could be better than that!”

R&D *A bumper sticker says, “Buddha’s way is the way to freedom.” How do you react to that, and why?*

Prayer: *Jesus is the door through whom we have eternal life with You, Lord God, the ultimate gift You have given us.*

Tuesday, November 28

Read: John 10:11-18

Good Shepherd

Most of us have in our mind’s eye the painting of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, carrying the lost sheep of parable (Matthew 18:10-14) fame on his shoulders, rejoicing as he returns it to the fold. We can identify with times when we have been lost, perhaps as a child in the woods, found by a parent; or, lost in a large city and aided by a policeman or a good citizen to find our way.

We can take the situations of being helped by good shepherds that we have faced in our own lives and multiply them by infinity to compare with what it means for Jesus to be our Good Shepherd.

In Jesus’ time on earth, it was no small thing to be a shepherd. The shepherd was absolutely charged with responsibility for the sheep. If one of them died, he had to be able to prove that he was in no way responsible for the loss.

In the teaching that surrounds Jesus’ claim of being the Good Shepherd, there are two main points. “The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (v.11b). What more could we ask than that, and that is exactly what Jesus did for us. Jesus gave his life that we might be forgiven of our sins and put in a right relationship with God.

But Jesus also says, “I know my own, and my own know me” (v.14b). Just as the shepherd of Jesus’ day had to know each individual sheep, and those sheep knew who their shepherd was no matter how intermingled they might be with the sheep of other

shepherds, so Jesus knows those who have given their lives to his care.

R&D Sheep apparently are very dumb animals. How do you feel about being a sheep of the Good Shepherd?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you know how easily I can go astray. Thank you for being my Good Shepherd, one who is willing to carry me on your shoulders and bring me back each time.

Wednesday, November 29

Read: John 11:17-27

Life Becomes Joy

This “I am” saying of Jesus was uttered in connection with the death of his friend Lazarus, and Lazarus’ sister Martha’s appeal to Jesus to do something about it. Those of us who have watched a loved one die can identify with Martha’s feelings.

During Jesus’ time, the Pharisees believed in a life to come, but Jesus’ statement had far more meaning than that. After referring to himself as the resurrection and the life, Jesus goes on to say, “Whoever believes in me will never die.” Because we know that Christians experience physical death just as anyone else does, we must look for another meaning to Jesus’ statement than a purely physical one.

Jesus is putting a whole new twist on death. It is more a new beginning than an end, a sunrise rather than a sunset. That is not to overlook the trauma of physical death nor the pain that we experience who stay behind while our loved one goes to be with the Lord. But it is to understand that where that loved one goes is a “far, far better place.”

To accept Jesus as the resurrection and the life is to accept what he has said as true and to bet our lives on that sort of trust in him. When we do that, we enter into two new types of relationships.

The first of these relationships is with God. If we believe that God is as Jesus says He is, we become convinced of His love. With that, the fear of death ends. We will still be concerned about

the physical pain of death and separation from our loved ones, but we will know God loves us and wants us with Him.

The second relationship that opens to us is a new relationship with life. When we truly turn our lives over to Jesus, we begin to live in a new way. There isn't a terminal point of disaster (death) that must ultimately be faced, necessitating our getting all the "gusto" we can while we can. Instead, we accept Jesus' way of living, following his commands, seeking and finding his guidance in the day-to-day decisions we face. Life becomes joy.

R&D *"When we truly turn our lives over to Jesus, we begin to live in a new way." How has this been true in your life?*

Prayer: *Lord, we live eternally with You now, and it is an abundant life!*

Thursday, November 30

Read: John 14:1-11

Way, Truth, and Life

How many are there among our friends and acquaintances who are wealthy but have found no peace, seek to be loved but receive only lies, yearn to be alive and vital but feel tired and wasted? How sad, when Jesus can meet our every need, because he is the way, the truth, and the life. Let us look at each of these elements in detail.

The Old Testament talks a great deal about "the way." In Deuteronomy 5:33 God said to Moses, "You shall walk in all the way which the LORD your God has commanded you." In Deuteronomy 31:29, Moses said to the people, "I know that after my death you will surely act corruptly, and turn aside from the way which I have commanded you." Isaiah said, "This is the way, walk in it" (30:21b). To Jews of the Old Testament, Jesus' statement that he was the way would have had a familiar sound.

Jesus is not one who simply tells us where to go. He is the one who says, "Come with me; let me take you where you should go." He not only gives us directions, he takes us by the hand and leads us. He does not tell us about the way, he is the way.

“Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice” (John 18:39b), Jesus says to Pilate. And Pilate asks, “What is truth?” But rather than listening to what Jesus might say, he goes out to try to work out a practical compromise with the crowd. Today we live in an age of relativism when Christians are ridiculed for believing that there is such a thing as absolute truth. Truth is ultimate reality, something that the pragmatic world (interested in results, here and now, and whatever compromise is necessary to accomplish them) cannot understand. We come to understand truth by understanding the Jesus of Scripture, who is the truth.

The psalmist has said, “Thou dost show me the path of life; in thy presence there is fullness of joy, in thy right hand are pleasures forevermore” (16:11). In the final analysis, what people are seeking is life (promised by Jesus in abundance, John 10:10). Our search is for what will make life worth living. Jesus himself is the answer. Life with Jesus is life abundant.

R&D How do you respond to the person who says that Jesus is only one of the ways to God?

Prayer: Way, truth, and life—you have made them all available to us, Lord Jesus; what alternative could compare with that?

Friday, December 1

Read: John 15:1-11

Vine

The imagery of vine and vineyard was common to the Jews of Jesus’ time. In the Old Testament this symbolism was often used to describe the people of God. However, when Israel was described as a vine, it was to demonstrate that something was wrong. In Isaiah 5:4, the vineyard has produced wild grapes; in Jeremiah 2:21 the vine has become debased and worthless. Jesus, on the contrary, is the true vine (John 15:1). He encompasses the true Israel and access to God is now possible only through him.

Jesus used the symbol of the vine because of the people’s familiarity with it. They knew a vine needed attention and pruning to make it fruitful. A young vine was not allowed to bear fruit for the first three years; each year it would be cut back drastically

in order to develop in a strong and healthy manner. Then, once it began to be productive, there would be two kinds of branches: those that would bear fruit and those that would not. The latter would be pruned back so as not to drain nutrients away from the vine unnecessarily.

Parallels to life in Christ are evident. As young Christians, we need a lot of pruning as we grow in knowledge and love of the Lord. Then, even after we have become “productive” Christians, we still need that part of our lives that is not useful to God to be removed so that we may concentrate on the work He has given us to do.

We can only grow and become spiritually fruitful by abiding in the Vine that is Christ. This involves not only maintaining a close relationship with him through prayer, Bible study, and worship but also allowing his Spirit to be the empowering force in our lives.

R&D *What kind of pruning do those new in the faith need?*

Prayer: *Spiritual growth is a process that goes on all of our lives, Lord Christ; keep us closely connected to you.*

Saturday, December 2

Read: John 21:15-25

Follow Me

Throughout John’s gospel, we see Peter as a devoted disciple. Yet in John 18, Peter’s devotion is eclipsed by denial. The one who promised to die for his Master asserts that he is not Jesus’ disciple.

In today’s passage, Jesus commissions Peter to a ministry which will lead to his death and again invites Peter to follow. Is Jesus addressing the same man who deserted him only a few days before? Wholehearted devotion didn’t facilitate Peter’s faithfulness to Jesus then, what will empower him now?

Jesus loved Peter on the cross. He breathed the Holy Spirit on him. He rehabilitated him from a three-fold denial by eliciting a three-fold declaration and giving a three-fold commission. Peter

is empowered for ministry because, although Peter deserted Jesus, Jesus didn't desert Peter.

How can we in our ministries be more like the Peter who died than the Peter who denied? We may serve out of devotion to Jesus. Like Peter, though, we need to realize that our love for Jesus does not ultimately enable us. His Jove in us does. As we follow in response to his love, he will empower us through the Holy Spirit, as he did for Peter.

R&D As we contemplate the end of one year and beginning of another, to what extent do we plan to follow Jesus?

Prayer: We can't do it on our own, Lord Christ; we need your empowering to be the people you call us to be.

Sunday, December 3

Sabbath Time

More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. Romans 5:3-4

Life finds us out, and our first discovery may be very like the discovery of Saint Peter when he went out and wept bitterly after denying his Lord. But that was not the last word about Simon Peter, nor need our failures ever be the last word about ourselves. We can learn by our mistakes and, if life finds us out, we can find out our God in our life, and through its challenge and His grace bring forth the fruit that shall make us known as His children.



Servanthood

Advent Study

Monday, December 4

Read: Matthew 25:31-46

Introduction

It is an error to think that work is not Christian work nor service to God unless it is work done in and for the Church. Actually, the witness made, usually unconsciously, in routine, everyday life may be at least as significant and productive as that of overtly religious work. Among those touched by the Christian gospel there is a growing awareness that God calls us to serve Him in many kinds of activity and that secular work, however menial but carried out with commitment to Him, is a holy enterprise. The Church's teaching function is to prepare men and women to be Christians on the job, people who practice their faith in daily life.

In reference to our reading for today, those who truly serve the Lord often do it in such a manner as to seem unconscious of the fact that they are specifically doing Christian service. They are just doing what comes naturally.

The dignity of Christian service is that it is really the only thing we can give that is truly our own. We do not create our talents or our natural resources but are recipients of these through God's gracious gift. We are stewards of our gifts but donors of our service. There is joy in knowing that no matter how humble our task, we are servants of the Lord, fellow workers with Him in His work of creation.

This Advent, as we prepare once again for the coming of the Lord, let us be mindful of the example of servanthood that Christ set for us.

R&D *What does Christian servanthood mean to you?*

Prayer: *So fill us with Your love, Lord God, that we may share it with others without even realizing that we are doing so.*

Tuesday, December 5

Read: Joshua 24:14-28

The Decision

Christian servanthood has its roots in the Old Testament. The historical books of the Old Testament are clearly intended not merely to be source material for students of ancient history but to go far beyond that in demonstrating how God in His love repeatedly offers His people abundant life in relationship with Him. In response, people time after time throw it all away through disobedience.

In this passage Joshua reminds the people of the choice before them—to serve the gods served by their forefathers in the land beyond the river, or the gods of the land of the Amorites where they now live, or the Lord God. For Joshua himself there is but one avenue, expressed in his affirmation, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

In his last speech to the people, Joshua once again reiterates the benefits of serving God, the perils of disobedience, and the promises of God. When the people declare their intent to serve the Lord and Him alone, Joshua renews the covenant between God and the people as a sign of their loyalty.

R&D *Have you and your household made a conscious choice of whom you will serve? How do you put your choice into effect?*

Prayer: *“Household” can be a rather broad term in our day, Lord. We pray that those whom You would consider part of our household are serving You and will continue to do so despite the distractions of the world.*

Wednesday, December 6

Read: Isaiah 42:1-4

The Servant

Among the most profound passages in the Old Testament are the four known as the Servant Songs. Through the ages a great

deal of speculation has taken place as to the identity of the servant. According to tradition, the servant is Israel, the martyr-nation, but a widely held Christian view is that in these songs we have a prophecy of the coming Savior. Other interpretations offered have concluded that the servant is the faithful remnant or a historical figure such as Jeremiah. Be that as it may, the writer of Second Isaiah gives us this picture of the perfect servant of God who through his sufferings and death would bring people to a fuller knowledge of God.

Matthew 20:28 tells us that Jesus “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Our Lord *was* a servant who suffered for us and called us to be his servants in the world. We may not have to give up our life in the sense that Jesus did, but in another sense that is exactly what we are called to do. Rather than living a life of self-indulgence, which would be natural to us, we are to give that life up in exchange for one of service.

Our suffering may be no more than denying ourselves some pleasure in order to help another, but it will be a giving of our lives, day by day, for the rest of our lives. But, as the Epistle of James tells us (1:2), “Count it all joy” when we meet various trials, because we are doing the very work of God.

R&D *What joy do you find in doing what you believe God wants you to do?*

Prayer: *Help me, Lord, to understand what it means for me, in my small way, to be your servant.*

Thursday, December 7

Read: Isaiah 49:1-8

Mission of the Servant

In this, the second Servant Song, Israel is seen to be the servant, predestined for her mission since the time of Abraham. To her, the foreordained servant nation, has been entrusted the mission to all the world.

The hiddenness hinted at in verse 2 is that of protection and preparation until time for taking up the responsibility for

conveying the divine light to all peoples. She trusts confidently in Yahweh and His steadfastness. In motivating many to embrace righteousness, she will be the instrument of Yahweh's forgiveness of the sins of many.

Israel is a chosen people, redeemed for the purpose of working toward the salvation of the nations, but she is also a servant nation. Privilege always carries with it responsibility; and the privilege of special relationship with God requires an obligation of obedience, humility, and faithfulness.

We once thought of our nation as a Christian nation, and, in that sense, a "chosen people." Certainly, we are a nation that has been blessed with many privileges which carry corresponding responsibilities. Many say we are in a post-Christian era in our country today, a time to reassess our responsibility to serve in new and more effective ways.

R&D How would you describe a servant nation today?

Prayer: Lord God, we can only be a Christian nation when our leaders and our people look to Jesus Christ for leadership and guidance.

Friday, December 8

Read: Isaiah 50:4-9

Undaunted Confidence

Here the servant of Yahweh appears to be an individual rather than the nation. Although he apparently has undergone relentless persecution and stern opposition among his own people, he nonetheless manifests unbounded confidence that his opponents will eventually be vanquished. In contrast, his teaching will endure forever.

Despite the suffering and torment and humiliation he has sustained, he remains stalwart, never retreating from his mission. He claims continuous inspiration in the divine direction he receives daily. Teacher and pastor, he is effective in his mission principally because the Lord has opened his ears to hear and understand the divine "marching orders." Equipped with this guidance, he goes forth confidently and unflinchingly to challenge his enemies, certain that vindication is imminent.

Verses 7-9 sound very much like the way in which Paul ended the famous eighth chapter of his Epistle to the Romans (vv.38-39), that nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God. Those are indeed comforting words for us all as we are called into Christian servanthood.

R&D *How does God convey His “marching orders” to us? Do we recognize them as such, and how do we act upon them?*

Prayer: *Holy God, You speak to us in many ways. Help us to hear You clearly as You call us to action in Your service.*

Saturday, December 9

Read: Isaiah 52:13—53:12

Paradox

In this fourth Servant Song we once again see the servant identified with a person. Difficulty in reconciling the concept of the servant as an individual with that of the servant as the nation can be mollified by remembering that the characteristic Hebrew idea of personality does not separate the individual from the group to which he belongs. Thus, the servant might be at one and the same time, or successively, both individual and corporate.

It is this image of the servant we study today that Jesus chose as his model of the kind of Messiah he was called to be. He identified with this Messiah who, though beaten, rejected, and killed, was nevertheless fulfilling the will and purpose of God. Ironically, the vocation that Israel renounced was fulfilled by Jesus, the unlikely messianic figure. In him was incarnated the paradox of humiliation and the divine plan of salvation.

Just as Jesus could see in this passage the model of the Messiah he was to be, his life in obedience to it is a model for our servanthood as well. As has been noted earlier, we may not have to die physically for our faith, but we are called to die to our selfish nature. In a post-Christian era, we may find that we will have to stand up for our faith in other ways as well, ways that could lead to rejection and forms of persecution.

R&D *To what extent are you prepared to be a “suffering servant” for the Lord?*

Prayer: *Give us strength and courage to stand up for Jesus despite the circumstances we face.*

Sunday, December 10

Sabbath Time

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. 1 Corinthians 10:13

To find the Real we ourselves must be real. We cannot bring God our sins that we may keep them, but we can bring God our temptations that we may overcome them. We may be conscious of great disorder within ourselves and feel that we are full of evil desires, but nonetheless, we can at least desire that our desires may be pure. The wish to will as God wills is itself a prayer spark that He can kindle to a flame, and from such humble but quite honest beginnings souls have often found their way of escape from the mists to the mountains.

Monday, December 11

Read: Matthew 25:14-30

Use of Our Gifts

We now begin to look at what Jesus taught about Christian servanthood. One of Jesus' most effective teaching methods was the parable, giving people a word picture of the idea he was trying to convey.

The thrust of this parable, which is directed to all Christians, is diligence in carrying out the tasks of the Church and proper use of the various gifts and talents given to each by God to be used for the common good. Even those persons with least ability are cautioned to use to best advantage the faculties entrusted to them by God if they would share in the kingdom. In this story the man who buried his talent (v.18) is he who does not use his God-given gifts in service to the Church and to others.

The talents (meaning a sum of money in use in Jesus' day, from which our word "talent" was derived) were meted out by the master to the servants in accordance with their abilities, the great-

est sum going to the most able, the least to the least able. Yet, all three servants were deemed to have some ability.

Many of us know from experience that muscles not used waste away and soon become useless. The lesson to be gleaned from the parable is that active service is called for, not merely passive fidelity. Apathy cannot be excused on the grounds that “so little is committed to my charge that it doesn’t matter whether I do anything or not.” This is not so since certain abilities have been given to each with the admonition that they be put to active use in service to the Lord.

R&D Have your gifts been identified? How are you using them in service to the Lord?

Prayer: Lord, You call all of us to service and provide the gifts we need to perform it. No excuses.

Tuesday, December 12

Read: Luke 10:5-37

Priorities

Leading into the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan, a conversation between a lawyer and Jesus sharply contrasts the difference between the ethics of law and the integrity of love. This parable with which Jesus answers the lawyer is the story of intimate, costly, self-giving care to a stranger in need shown by a Samaritan, an outcast of society, and the apathy and insensitivity exhibited by two Jewish leaders, due to their preoccupation with and overzealous observance of the law and its minutiae.

The lawyer sees eternal life as the prize to be won by scrupulous attention to religious rules; Jesus, on the other hand, sees life in the heavenly kingdom already begun through service to God and neighbor while still here on earth. Religion, to the former, is a set of restrictive regulations while the latter views it as boundless opportunity to show forth love and caring and in this way to serve the Lord through serving his fellowman.

In his book, *The Body*, Charles Colson tells the story of a clergyman who had experienced the conviction of this parable in his own life. He confessed to his parishioners that three new peo-

ple had come into the congregation at the same time, a prominent couple, and a troubled youth. He had devoted his time and attention to the couple but not to the young man who had subsequently “dropped by the wayside.” The couple had become members of the church, but the young man later committed murder. To that young man, the clergyman had simply “passed by on the other side.”

R&D When and under what circumstances have you become so engrossed in the details of being a good church member that you did not have time to help a person in need?

Prayer: Give us eyes to see those in need around us, Lord, because need comes in many forms.

Wednesday, December 13

Read: Luke 22:24-27

True Greatness I

Jesus’ words and teachings have channeled the thoughts of the Twelve into anticipation of the coming of God’s kingdom and quite naturally speculation begins concerning who among them will receive the honor and distinction of leadership in position or status. In words reminiscent of his rebuke of the sons of Zebedee who also sought positions of honor in the coming kingdom, Jesus silences their aspirations by instructing them in the true meaning of leadership, i.e., servitude.

Greatness is not to be confused with power nor dignity with recognition. The only greatness acknowledged in the kingdom is that of humble service. Jesus evidenced this throughout his ministry, asserting repeatedly that he was one who came not to be served but to serve.

Most of us live in a competitive environment. We are expected to “do our best” and to “get ahead.” It is not surprising that we carry that thrust into our work for the Lord. What Jesus is saying is that Christian leadership is servant leadership; servanthood may well lead us into positions of responsibility, but that should simply be the result and not the goal of our involvement.

R&D *When and under what circumstances has my decision to undertake a job been influenced by the thought of recognition or prestige?*

Prayer: *The only thing “great” in anything we accomplish, Lord, is the greatness of Your love and mercy that let us do it.*

Thursday, December 14

Read: Mark 9:33-37

True Greatness II

On the way to Capernaum the disciples, unaware that Jesus could overhear them, begin to argue as to which of them is greatest. They are ignorant of the fact that the test of true greatness is humility and service, the very foundation of Christian discipleship. Instead of rebuking them sternly, Jesus simply states, “If any man would be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.” Not only does true greatness lead to humbleness of spirit which willingly takes last place, the least position, but it includes also a strong desire to minister, to serve.

Jesus further illustrates this teaching by taking a little child in his arms, saying, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.” To help a little child or one who, like a little child, is helpless or in some way in need of care, is to do a really significant deed done in the name of Christ and for the sake of Christ, such is truly service to the Lord himself.

The early church especially understood its ministry to widows and orphans. In our day, due to the breakdown of marriages, our churches have many single-parent families. As tragic as this is, it gives us an opportunity to minister to the children the love that they may not adequately receive at home due to the absence of one of the parents (and perhaps even animosity between the parents concerning them). It is an opportunity to put today’s passage into practice.

R&D *Look around you for the one who especially needs your love and attention today.*

Prayer: *Lord, help me to see You and serve You humbly in others.*

Friday, December 15

Read: Mark 10:32-45

True Status

On the journey to Jerusalem, Jesus continues his instruction to the disciples, those who are to be the keystone of the coming kingdom. James and John, sons of Zebedee, slow to comprehend the true meaning of the teaching, request places of privilege in the kingdom that is to come.

Jesus takes this opportunity to expound on the nature of this kingdom, the hierarchy of which is in the hands of God alone. He points out that while those who rule over others and are served by many are held to be the great leaders in the world, among his followers different standards prevail. Those who are truly greatest are they who best serve others. Service is the rule, the measuring stick of greatness in the kingdom.

In this mode, the Lord himself came to serve and not to be served, to minister and not be ministered to, to give his life “as a ransom for many.” We are not Christians because we serve others, but we serve others because we are Christians.

R&D *By what standards does the Church today judge greatness?*

Prayer: *May I so live my life in you, Christ Jesus, that those who have occasion to serve me see me as a servant to them as well.*

Saturday, December 16

Read: Luke 17:7-10

God's Just Due

Our Lord, having exhorted his disciples to good works, proceeds now to rebuke the vainglory which too often results. This is a warning against the bookkeeping type mentality that seeks to build up a credit balance with the Lord.

An honest day's labor is what a servant owes his master and is no more than his duty to deliver. The master is entitled to this, his just due, and is under no obligation to the servant. Likewise, we do not merit God's special approval for doing what He expects of us. Nothing that we can do is beyond what is His by right. We can never claim merit in our dealings with Him but must strive

to serve Him with our best, for only our best is good enough for Him.

We have now looked at the things that Jesus taught about servanthood. We are actively to use the gifts God has given us in ministering to others; we are to be “Good Samaritans” to those whose needs confront us; we are to see that our “greatness” (obedience to God) is measured in terms of what we do for others; we could have a special ministry to children; as Christ’s people we are here to serve, and serving is simply our duty, not the basis of our earning favor with God

R&D *To what extent do you believe you are headed in the right direction as a servant of the Lord?*

Prayer: *Lord, I know that my “best” is not good enough for You. Show me how I can make my “best” even better.*

Sunday, December 17

Sabbath Time

“But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.” John 14:26

Our life is a great adventure, a romance, a splendid and wonderful thing, a quest which was started by God Himself. Our Lord died to redeem our journeying from the only failure which is real failure, and that is spiritual failure. It matters not what may come to us, what may oppose us, what pain or darkness we may go through. The Holy Spirit will teach us in all these things to form the faculties which will fit us to behold the vision of God as through the purging of experience we are recreated according to the likeness of that image wherein the creative mind of God first conceived us.

Monday, December 18

Read: Philippians 2:1-11

Jesus, Lord of All

Now we have an opportunity to learn what Paul has to say about Christian servanthood. He gives specific advice on the subject, but mainly he says to use Christ as our example.

In his letter to the Christians at Philippi, we find the most winsome and engaging picture we have of Paul the Christian. His gentler side shines through his customary air of sternness due, possibly, to the fact that he wrote this letter as his life was drawing to a close and he had mellowed.

Verses 1-5 imply that perhaps even in this exemplary congregation there is some discord. To this, Paul offers as antidote the advice that they forget themselves and adopt Christ's humble demeanor toward their neighbors.

In verses 6-11 we read what is thought to be one of the earliest of Christian hymns. In it, in words suggestive of Isaiah 53, the last of the Servant Songs, we see Christ prevailing over the temptation to seize parity with God and, instead, choosing the role of the suffering servant. By his utmost obedience, even to death, he was highly exalted by God and made Lord of all creation. We read in verses 10 and 11 that God exalted Christ in order that all created things in heaven, on earth and in the underworld might pay homage to him as Lord to the glory of God the Father. With these words the hymn draws to a majestic close.

R&D In what way is humility the real key to unity among Christians?

Prayer: It is only in humility that we are real, Lord God, and it is essential that we be real with You.

Tuesday, December 19

Read: Ephesians 4:1-16

One Common Calling

In today's passage, Paul outlines in detail to the people at Ephesus the kind of life required of those who would serve the Lord in the fellowship of the Christian Church. It is our calling as followers of Christ to set an example of humility, patience, gentleness, and love. To each has been given a particular gift to be used for the good of all, the goal being that through the application of these gifts the Church might grow to maturity until it manifests the wholeness of Christ in its life.

That there is perhaps some element of discord and heresy in the church at Ephesus is hinted at in Paul's admonition (v.14) not

to be swayed by every new notion that comes along. This speaks to us today in our concern over divisions in the Church but, as antidote, we must keep in mind the many things on which all Christians are united. We all worship the same God and Father. We all confess Christ as Lord and Savior. We all share the same hope of salvation and we all affirm the preeminence of the law of love. When Christ is the head, there is room for diversity in unity.

R&D *Have you identified your special gift? To what use in service to God is it being put?*

Prayer: *What good are our spiritual gifts, Lord, if we don't put them into Your service?*

Wednesday, December 20

Read: Galatians 5:13-14

Perfect Freedom

While some might interpret personal freedom or the end of the primacy of the law as license to follow our own desires, propensities or proclivities, Paul cautions against turning liberty into opportunity for self-indulgence.

For him, there remain two obligations. First, the obligation to God. If He loves us as much as we know He does, we cannot soil and blemish a life He valued so highly that He paid for it with His own life in the death of Jesus. Second, the obligation to others. We are free but this is a freedom which loves its neighbor as itself, a freedom to act in love through the Spirit's power. This is by no means the end of all moral constraints; instead, perfect freedom means service. In the words of that beautiful prayer, "... whose service is perfect freedom," the Christian is not one who has been made free to sin but who, by God's grace, has become free not to sin.

Paul maintains that the person who wholeheartedly seeks to serve fulfills the law because a life of loving service is the underlying tenet of the law in its purist sense.

R&D *Reflect on the words "whose service is perfect freedom."*

Prayer: *Thank You, Lord, that life in Christ frees us from the bondage of worldly influences to be the people You want us to be.*

Thursday, December 21

Read: 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

Privilege and Task

Here Paul shares with us his view of his ministry. First, he considers it both obligation and privilege, a duty yet something he could not dream of not doing—sharing the gospel. His greatest reward is knowing that his work is a job well-done. His is the satisfaction of having a part in bringing the good news to all who will receive it. He refuses to accept the stipend that any preacher is entitled to expect, acting upon an inner compulsion similar to that experienced by Peter and John when they said, “For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20).

Then he speaks of the method of his ministry. Although he has been truly liberated by Christ, paradoxically he has intentionally made himself servant of all, becoming all things to all people for the sake of a more effective ministry. To this end, he fasts, remains celibate, to the Jews being as a Jew, to the Gentiles as one of their own. It is said that in order to understand another, one must walk in his shoes. Paul, the consummate missionary, recognizes this and thus becomes all things to all people so as to be better able to do the one thing that matters most: to lead others to Christ!

R&D *What is meant by the saying “to be all things to all people”?*

Prayer: *Help us to minister in such a way as to identify with those we help, showing genuine love without sacrificing truth.*

Friday, December 22

Read: 1 Corinthians 4:1-11

God’s Stewards

Paul makes it clear in this part of his letter to the Christians at Corinth that he, as well as Apollos, Cephas, and other leaders of the Church, are all primarily servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. The steward was the major domo, in complete charge of the household and staff. However, in spite of the preeminence of his position, he was still slave to the master.

Paul originally used an interesting word here for servant: *huperetes*, meaning a rower on an ancient vessel, one of the slaves who pulled at the great oars that moved the boat through the sea. This evokes an image of Christ as the pilot, dictating the course of the ship and Paul as the slave, accepting and acting on the orders of the pilot, working only as directed by the pilot.

Paul then goes on to speak of the three judgments faced by every person. First is the judgment of others, which often is more accurate than we would like to believe, though Paul claims not to be affected by it. Then there is judgment of oneself. Basically, we must face ourselves, and since we cannot escape living with ourselves, it is unendurable to lose self-respect. Finally, we must face God's judgment which, in the final analysis, is the only real judgment, for judgment belongs to Him.

R&D *What does it mean to be a steward of "the mysteries of God"?*

Prayer: *We are privileged to be your people here on earth, Lord Christ; help us never to forget that you are the pilot of our ship.*

Saturday, December 23

Read: Philemon 8-14

Note to a Friend

This brief letter to his friend Philemon, a wealthy and prominent citizen of Colossae, is the only existing example of Paul's private correspondence. Since Paul was responsible for Philemon's conversion to Christianity, there is a close bond between the two. Under Paul's influence Onesimus, too, had been converted to Christianity and probably it was because of this tie that Onesimus turned to Paul when the fugitive found himself far from home. Therefore, it was natural that Paul should write to his friend on behalf of the young man.

The name Onesimus means "helpful" and although he had been useful to Paul, he was legally a runaway slave and must make his peace with his master and with God, and must take his punishment. Thus, Paul sends this personal appeal to Philemon's generosity, giving us a glimpse into the tender heart of this great apostle. While recognizing the master's rights over his slave, Paul softens

this with a Christian plea for mercy, offering to repay any debts Onesimus owes Philemon.

R&D *How generous could you be to someone who had betrayed your trust?*

Prayer: *Father God, forgiveness isn't an option if we follow Your will. Help us to truly forgive.*

Sunday, December 24

Sabbath Time

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. John 1:14a

The Bible is really the guided, inspired word of man about the Word of God, but there is only one real Word of God, and that is our Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible gives us the inspired prophecy that looks forward to His coming, and the inspired memoirs of men who wrote about Him when He came, but the one Word of God that abides forever is our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the everlasting Word that shall never fail, He is the everlasting Revelation that shall never pass away, the everlasting Life in Whom alone we shall find our perfect place.

Monday, December 25

Read: Luke 2:1-20

Birth of Our Lord

The Gospel of Luke has been called “the most beautiful book in the world.” In this chapter, the story of the birth of Christ, we see Luke the poet, writing not for the person with a measuring-tape mind but, rather, for the one who can appreciate the narrative written by the combined mind of a theologian and the soul of a poet. In this exquisite nativity story are found the important elements of prophecy, history, and symbolism.

That there was no room at the inn foretells the later plight of the Son of Man having no place to lay his head, the King of the Jews having in place of a throne a crown of thorns. The simple shepherds, his first worshippers, are forerunners of the multitudes of humble folk who would flock to him during his public ministry. The angelic chorus foresees the exultation which rings throughout the Gospel. This heavenly choir, gathered to celebrate the new cre-

ation, proclaims the advent of God's full glory in the establishment of his kingdom and the promise of true peace and blessing to all who would follow him.

"O, morning stars together
Proclaim the holy birth;
And praises sing to God our King
And peace to men on earth."

R&D *What do you do to keep Christ notably in Christmas?*

Prayer: *Lord Christ, you are the Gift of all gifts for us and for all once again this Christmas Day.*

Tuesday, December 26

Read: Philemon 15-25

Brothers in Christ

It seems a bit strange to us who believe that slavery as an institution is incompatible with the Christian gospel that Paul never questions the right of Christians to own slaves. However, it must be remembered that in his day the lot of a slave was frequently considerably better than that of "free" persons today. It was not uncommon for slaves to be trusted and valued members of a household who often were paid wages that enabled them to save and eventually purchase their freedom.

In a household where the master, his family, and the slaves had been converted, the old status remained but the injection of a quality of brotherhood tempered any harshness of the former relationship. Common allegiance to Christ brought about an entirely new bond wherein each acknowledged the other as a child of God and therefore a brother. This letter of Paul's in which he put the relationship of master-slave in the context of Christian brotherhood engendered a principle that eventually ended the ownership by one man of another's life and very being.

R&D *Reflect on this: Where there is real brotherhood, it makes little difference if one is master and the other servant.*

Prayer: *Our place before you, Lord Jesus, is a place of brotherhood and equality.*

Wednesday, December 27

Read: Romans 1:1-7

Master and Slave

This letter of Paul's to the church at Rome, a church he has not visited and did not know personally, differs from his letters to other churches, in which he dealt with a pressing problem or threatening situation or current error.

In this letter, after giving his own credentials as servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, he continues with a systematic exposition of his doctrinal position. His favorite word for Jesus is Lord (*Kurios*). This Greek word describes someone who has unequivocal possession of a person or thing, a master or incontestable owner. The opposite of *kurios* is *doulos* or slave. Paul calls himself the *doulos*, the slave, of Jesus Christ, his Master and his Lord.

Since Jesus loved him to the point of giving himself for him, Paul claims he no longer belongs to himself but solely and completely to his Lord. In declaring himself to be the slave of the Lord, Paul follows in the footsteps of Moses and Joshua and other great men of God. The prophets proudly claimed the title that distinguished them from other men, the slaves or servants of God. Their greatness and their glory lay in their being slaves of God and, as servant of Christ, Paul follows in their train.

R&D *How can we live lives of servanthood today? Give examples.*

Prayer: *The highest privilege of humankind is to be a slave of Christ.*

Thursday, December 28

Read: 1 Peter 2:18-26

Christians as Servants

Of all the General Epistles, 1 Peter is thought to be the best known and most widely read, due perhaps to its relevance to everyday life in our time as well as in ages past.

In this portion of the First Letter of Peter, the author speaks explicitly to the largest social class in the early church—servants or slaves. Since slavery had its beginning in Roman conquest, slaves originally were the prisoners taken in war. Thus, musicians, doctors, stewards, and teachers frequently became slaves; and it was

not unusual for them to be accepted as loved and trusted members of the family. However, one inescapable fact remained: No matter how well loved, a slave remained a possession, with no legal rights.

Christianity brought into this situation a startling message that in God's sight everyone was equal and precious. Peter goes on to say that this in no way absolves a Christian from discipline but, rather, requires self-discipline that makes him a more conscientious workman. It was Peter's concern that Christian slaves should witness to the world that it was their very faith that inspired them to produce an honest day's work and to be Christian within the given situation until such time as conditions might change.

R&D In what unfavorable situation have you at some time found yourself? What witness did you make of it to the world?

Prayer: Whatever our "station in life" may be, our subservience is to You, Lord God, to be the person You call us to be.

Friday, December 29

Read: Ephesians 6:5-9

Submissiveness

In an approach suggestive of Colossians 3:22—4:1, Paul here advances his teaching on the just and desirable relationship of master and servant. We find in this passage a message of Christian ethics that regardless of where God has set us, we must live out the Christian life. Christianity does not offer us escape from trouble and suffering, but it does provide the strength to deal with circumstances.

Paul cautions slaves to give their best to an assigned task not only when the overseer's eye is upon them, for the goal of their work is not simply to please men. But all work must be done in the knowledge that God's eye is upon them, and the intent must be to please Him. Slipshod workmanship is not basically an economic problem that can be solved by increasing rewards or heightening penalties, but a faith-based one. The secret of good workmanship is that it is done for God.

Paul's advice to masters is that although they are masters of men, they still are servants of God. The day will come when

every man, master or slave, must stand before God and render an accounting of his life. No longer will there be master and slave but all will stand equal in the presence of the Lord.

R&D *How can people be motivated to make pleasing God their No. 1 goal?*

Prayer: *There is no deceiving You, Lord God; You know our ways wherever we are and whatever we do.*

Saturday, December 30

Read: John 13:1-20

Dignity of Service

In this passage, one of the most moving in Scripture, is the graphically emphasized lesson of the need of humility on the part of those committed to following Jesus.

Gathered together with Jesus in the upper room to celebrate the Passover, the disciples once more are arguing as to which of them should be judged greatest. Jesus, noting reluctance on the part of each disciple to serve at supper for fear of being thought inferior to the others, rises from the table. Laying aside his cloak, he ties a towel around his waist in the manner of a servant, pours water into a basin and starts to wash the disciples' feet.

According to the custom of the day, it was not unusual to offer a guest, tired and dusty from travel, the courtesy of having a servant wash his feet. In washing his disciples' feet, Jesus reverses the roles of master and servant, accepting the humble position of a slave; but in a deeper sense, his power and sovereignty are expressed in this humble act.

From this we learn the true meaning of authority and the use of power. It takes true greatness to be humble. Christians must be ready to stand as servants to others and, no matter what their station in the world, to walk the path of humility.

R&D *When have you felt the call to wash the feet of a hurting society? How have you responded?*

Prayer: *We need your cleansing wash, Lord Jesus, not just of our feet, but all of us.*

We love because he first loved us. 1 John 4:19

The highest love of all finds its fulfillment not in what it keeps, but in what it gives.