



The Essential Paul

Lenten Study

Day 1

Read: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

“Least of the Apostles”

Today begins a 40-day study of what seem to this writer to have been the most important teachings of the Apostle Paul, taken from his letters. Our Scripture passage rehearses the essentials of the Christian faith, faithfully taught and lived by Paul, and ends with what might be called a very abbreviated version of Paul’s autobiography.

Paul was born in Tarsus, a Jew who became a well-educated Pharisee and a Roman citizen. As a young man, his beliefs led him to persecute Christians. He was present at the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1a) and was on his way to Damascus to arrest believers when the risen Christ confronted him in a blinding vision (Acts 9:1-18). After Paul’s sight was restored, he became more zealous in promoting the faith than he had been in opposing it. Over the years he apparently received direct revelations of God through Christ in prayer that formed the basis of his theology.

Befriended by Barnabas when other Christians were understandably leery of him, Paul carried the Gospel to Antioch. He then made a series of missionary journeys that took him to Cyprus and Asia Minor, Macedonia, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, and places in between, leading people to Christ and founding churches. Later, after his arrest in Jerusalem, he was taken to Rome for trial. Again, he evangelized along the way. Some of his letters were written from prison in Rome. He was martyred on what is believed to have been a second visit to Rome during Nero’s persecution of 64.

Paul is generally regarded as being, second only to Jesus himself, the most notable Christian who ever lived. Let us explore together, this Lent, “The Essential Paul.”

R&D What, for you, is the most essential thing about Paul?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for the Apostle Paul and all You did in and through him to the enrichment of the Christian faith and the great benefit of those of us who follow.

Day 2

Read: Romans 3:21-26

God’s Answer

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (v.23). Paul minces no words in declaring our guilt! But this is not a condemning passage of Scripture, but one filled with very good news. There is no further we can fall, but we can look up from that awful situation in which we all find ourselves and see God’s solution.

In Jesus Christ, God has provided His way of righteousness for all people. We do not *achieve* righteousness by following the Law or even by imitating Jesus; we *receive* it through believing in him. It is a free gift from God coming to us because of absolutely nothing but God’s love for us and the gracious concern He has for us. It is when we learn the truth that “justification”

(that is, being made right with God) depends in no way on us but entirely on God's grace, that we begin to understand what Christianity is all about.

How does God accomplish this? By means of Jesus' death on our behalf. Jesus died in order to take upon himself the just consequences of our disobedience and to wash away the guilt of our sin. This is the significance of verse 26; God's way of restoring people to relationship with Himself is a totally just one because sin (far from being ignored) is punished (in Christ's death) and yet sinners are forgiven for Christ's sake. It has been said that these are perhaps the six most important verses in the Bible. Without the death of Jesus, there is no hope for any of us; but through his death all those who are his by faith are freely pardoned.

R&D *"The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6).*

Prayer: *Gracious God, You have done it all for us, and we have been rebellious children. Thank You that You love us still.*

Day 3

Read: Romans 5:1-11

Justified through Faith

In our last reading the point was clearly made that we are justified by the grace of God and in no other way. Paul now moves on to the next great revelation, that those who are justified by faith *will live*. By that he does not imply that we are now to rigorously obey a set of laws so we can stay in the good graces of God; to do that would simply put us back in the trap into which the Pharisees had fallen. No, Paul is talking about eternal life, final salvation, and heaven itself, guaranteed for all whom God has justified.

Justification gives us peace with God in the present and hope of eternal life for the future. This allows us to deal with the reality of the life in which we live. There are tensions and sufferings in this life, but they are not denials of God's love (vv.3-5). Instead, it is through this testing that we are shaped to be citizens of heaven. Pain and suffering are not things we look forward to! But, like a person being treated for a serious disease, the patient is able to bear the pain because there is no other hope for recovery.

Justification brings us reconciliation with God, and that leads to the desire to grow in our relationship with Him. If God loved us enough to send Christ to die for us, then certainly He loves us enough to provide a pathway for us, not only to continue in that reconciliation, but to grow in the knowledge and love of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a process, and it is one that can be fraught with difficulties. Just as learning anything new takes patience on the part of our teacher and diligence on our part as learners, so is the relationship between God and the Christian as we seek to live into the justification we have been granted. Despite our struggles and failures, God, as teacher, will not abandon us but will rejoice in our progress and welcome us home in the end.

R&D *As a practical matter, how can we "rejoice in our sufferings"?*

Prayer: *Lord, give us a steadfast mind, fully assured that Your love for us will never forsake us. And let this be for us never an excuse for disobedience, but an incentive to patient discipleship.*

Day 4

Read: Romans 6:11-23

Slaves to Righteousness

The statement that we are “dead to sin” (v.11) may raise questions in our minds, but not if we understand what Paul means by it. He is talking about our basic status before God. Now that we are in Christ, we are new creatures (2 Corinthians 5:17). Paul knows that we still have mortal bodies (v.12) and that the war with sin goes on until death. But, in verse 13, he tells us not to yield *the parts of our bodies* to sin, but to yield *ourselves* to God. The point is that while our members may rebel, our basic self belongs to God and He is not going to let go of us.

“Become what you are” is at the essence of Paul’s teaching. Christians don’t earn salvation by good works; but, through the Holy Spirit within us, good works are the natural result of faith. That is what happens when we “offer ourselves to God” (v.13) as ones who have been brought from death to life. We become instruments of righteousness, through grace, to the glory of God and the benefit of everyone else.

Paul then brings us the master/slave analogy. We have a choice of two masters: we can be slaves to sin or to Christ, but we cannot manipulate the consequences of our choice. Each of these masters has a method of compensation. The wages of sin is death; the gift of God is eternal life (v.23). A Christian reverting to sin is like a liberated slave going back to his former master. Instead, we should accept with thanksgiving the gift that God has freely given us, the opportunity to be slaves to righteousness.

R&D Reflect on the fact that the sinful life is truly a life of slavery.

Prayer: Help me, Lord, by the grace of Your Holy Spirit, to keep on track that I may not wander back into a life of slavery to sin.

Day 5

Read: Romans 8:26-30

All Things Work Together

We Christians are not left to our own resources to cope with our problems. God is saving us through His Son by His Holy Spirit. The Spirit is our ever-present help, for he is with us all the time. It is because of his leading that we can even begin to pray. This recalls the saying, “The prayer that gets beyond the ceiling is the one that starts beyond the ceiling!” Even when we don’t know the right words to pray, the Holy Spirit prays within us and for us. Our resources are always inadequate; God’s never are.

Furthermore, the Spirit insures that, in all the vicissitudes of life, things are working together for good (despite appearances that are sometimes to the contrary!) for those who love God. Even those things that Satan designs for evil can be reversed by God in turning every circumstance to our ultimate good. God’s providence and planning are in full control in every situation.

The key to verses 29-30 is that God’s salvation is for those who are “in Christ” and consists in our lives becoming conformed to his likeness. Christians are those who have been called by Christ and respond. God loved His Son, and us in him, before the foundation of the world; God sent His Son to die, and we died with him; and God raised him from the dead and we are justified in him. More than that, God exalted him to glory, so that we too have *already* been glorified in him. Just as there is no question of God ever ceasing to love His Son, so, because we are bound up in him, there is no question of God ever ceasing to love us.

R&D *Recall a situation in which things worked for good that, at the time, looked just the opposite.*

Prayer: *Blessed Lord, thank You for working in us through Your Holy Spirit for our good even when we seem unaware of Your presence.*

Day 6

Read: Romans 8:31-39

More than Conquerors

Today's reading, concluding one of the most important chapters in the Bible, contains one of the most comforting promises in all of Scripture. Paul wants to make us certain beyond any doubt that if we belong to Jesus Christ, then we are safe in the love of God for all eternity.

This is not wishful thinking to help us forget the real problems that surround us daily. Paul is entirely realistic about the world we live in and our everyday concerns. His is a faith that is able to look in the face of the worst the world has to offer, and yet is confident that God's love runs deeper than the cross-currents of worldly anxiety.

Paul says that Jesus is interceding for us in heaven. Although we have been acquitted by God, who has removed our sin and guilt, Satan may accuse us. In that case, we have Jesus as the advocate for our defense. He stands at God's right hand to represent us.

If our conscience reminds us of wrongs we have done, we know that God sent His Son to die for our sins. If we are worried that there may still be charges brought against us, we know that Jesus himself is our Messiah, and that we, the Messiah's people, have been brought safely by him through death to life. Jesus is on our side, always, everywhere, and forever.

R&D *If God is for us, who can be against us?*

Prayer: *Lord, as our faith is tested in the crucible of life, help us to see the strong hand of Your love upon us in everything.*

Day 7

Read: Romans 10:1-13

Christ Is the Fulfillment of the Law

At the heart of this passage stands the statement, "Christ is the end of the law" (v.4). But Paul could scarcely have meant that Christ abolished the law; the law is holy and good (7:12, 14, 16), and its decree is fulfilled in Christians (8:4) who keep it by love (13:8-10). The word "end" has a different meaning here, similar to that in 6:22, where the "end" of sanctification is eternal life. It means "fulfillment," or "consummation." The law is summed up in Christ.

Verses 5-13 are therefore an explanation of verse 4. Those who are joined to Christ by faith share in the righteous status that he has on the basis of his righteous life. He alone gained life by the law of Moses; we gain it by belonging to him by faith. No effort is required for this (vv.6-8); it is a matter of hearing and believing in the Messiah who has come down from heaven and been raised from the dead. And this faith opens the door to all, Jew and Gentile alike, to come in (vv.11-13), just as it shuts it on those who insist on a self-righteous approach (v.3). No need, then, to make salvation "easier" for anyone. God has brought His Messiah within the range of us all. Nor is this an abstract theory; it motivates Paul with a desire that all shall hear the message.

Verse 11 is also due some clarification. It does not mean that Christians will never be put to shame or disappointed. We are aware that there are times when we do stupid things, when others let us down, and when things don't turn out as we hoped they would. Yet, even in those times, God will keep His side of the bargain. Those who call on Him will be saved. God will provide righteousness for those who believe.

R&D Reflect on verse 10: *“For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.”*

Prayer: *Give us, Lord Jesus, such a faith in you that we may yearn, like Paul, to share it with others.*

Day 8

Read: Romans 10:14-21

How Will They Hear?

Our last study ended with the statement, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (10:13). Logically, that leads to the question of how they will hear. Scholars argue over the real meaning of this passage. Was Paul (in vv.14-17) commenting on the importance of his missionary work and our need to witness to Christ in our lives? Or was he trying to make the point that Israel had no one to blame but herself for rejecting the Gospel (vv.19-21)? Both of these are probably part of what Paul is saying. In Chapter 9 of Romans Paul had stressed the sovereignty of God, and he now shows that this does not alter our responsibility both to respond to the Gospel and to preach it.

If we are honest about the Christian faith, how it has been practiced and how it is viewed by others, it is easy to see that we have to a large extent failed our mission. When Jesus said, “On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matthew 16:18), he did not mean for us to have a fortress mentality. Yet we have tended to think of the Church as the safe haven in which we gather against a sometimes hostile and other times apathetic world. We apparently think that this fortress will protect us from the assaults of the devil (“gates of Hades”). But, in fact, gates don't attack; they need to be destroyed. We should be going out from the Church to confront evil forces in the world by bringing the Good News of salvation we have in Jesus Christ.

That brings us back to the question with which we began. How will those who do not know Christ learn of him if we do not take the great message of salvation to others that they may respond? How will our loved ones, our neighbors, our co-workers, and others hear the Good News if we do not share it? With the privileges of being a Christian certainly come concurrent responsibilities.

R&D *With whom have you recently shared the Good News of life in Christ?*

Prayer: *Gracious Lord, grant us to obey where Israel disobeyed, and to spread Your words to the end of the earth.*

Day 9

Read: Romans 12:1-8

Living Sacrifices

At this point in Paul's letter to the Romans, he has come to an end of his theological dissertation and begins to talk about the kind of behavior new life in Christ makes possible. He prefaces what he has to say about how Christians should live (vv.1-2) with a reminder that everything we do must spring from our gratitude for the mercy of God. Our only adequate response to the all-embracing love of God is to consecrate ourselves as living sacrifices.

Such consecration involves (1) *our bodies*; laying aside our selfish desires in order to serve Christ. So, likewise, we consecrate (2) *our minds*; no longer conforming to the patterns of the world around us but renewing our minds under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, (3) *our conduct* will change; we will be new people in Christ behaving in a manner that honors him. And, (4) *our wills* will begin to come into harmony with the will of God. That's what would be involved in being "living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God."

The natural fruit of our gratitude to God is humility. It demands a realistic estimate of ourselves—not thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to think—and a true understanding of God—each according to the measure of faith we have received from God. Among other things, this involves realizing that each of us is a part of the Body of Christ, his representatives on earth, and that we each have spiritual gifts which God has given us to do His work. There is no cause for pride in this; the gifts are not things we have earned or achieved on our own. They are purely gifts from God to be used for the benefit of others.

R&D *Who has been an example of being "a living sacrifice" in your life?*

Prayer: *Blessed Lord, You are love. So put Your love into our hearts that others may know we are Your disciples.*

Day 10

Read: Romans 14:1-8

Living for Each Other

We cannot know exactly what the real issues were that led to this teaching by Paul. Paganism in his world often involved animal sacrifices; and it was difficult for the Christian to know, if he was eating meat, whether it had been used in such a sacrifice. Also, there were certain days of pagan celebration, and others carried over from Jewish customs. Days that were precious to some may have been an abomination to others. These were issues of conscience that were not fundamental to the Christian faith.

In these verses Paul is concerned to preserve the individual's right to decide for himself on such issues. Differences of opinion, based upon conscientious convictions, are not wrong within the Body of Christ. What is important is that we not question the integrity of those with whom we differ. It is not helpful to be looking down on our brothers and sisters in Christ concerning matters that are not essential to the faith.

But there is a larger issue (vv.7-8) that Paul is dealing with in this passage. "For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord." The Christian life is not just about tolerating one another. We are inextricably bound together in the Lord. We are to live and die for one another.

R&D How, within your own Christian family, do you deal with differences of opinion on matters not essential to the faith?

Prayer: Lord, help us not to be judgmental, but self-sacrificing, in our relationship with others.

Day 11

Read: Romans 15:1-7

United in Christ

Today's reading carries on the theme of the last lesson and gets a little more specific. Christ is our example. He came as a man, not to do as he might otherwise have liked to do, but instead to give up his rights for our sake. This fact is at the root of all Christian life. "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4). We are to set aside willfulness and self-pleasing actions for the benefit of others.

In underlining the point, Paul brings up the importance of Scripture. He has in mind, of course, what we call the Old Testament because that was the only Scripture available at the time. The Scriptures are not just a collection of ancient documents; God intended them, and still intends them, to be a permanent source of encouragement and hope for His people. Furthermore, God Himself is the one who speaks to us in Scripture (vv.4-5), bringing His people into harmony with one another.

It is as God's people live out our commitment to one another in a "spirit of unity" that "with one heart and mouth" we may "glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul would know that we will have our disagreements with our brothers and sisters in Christ, but we should nonetheless love each other through our differences to the praise of God.

R&D How do you deal with issues that tend to separate you from your brothers and sisters in Christ?

Prayer: Shine in our hearts, Lord Jesus, that we may love mercy and walk humbly with you.

Day 12

Read: 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Temples of the Holy Spirit

"Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit?" In today's reading, Paul is dealing with the question of sexual morality. The Corinthians had been justifying promiscuity and prostitution on the grounds that "all things are lawful" for followers of Christ. Paul corrects them by pointing out that all things are not helpful. Jesus set us free from sin that we might no longer be controlled by it. That didn't mean that we should revert to being controlled by our lusts and desires.

Christianity places high value on the body because our physical existence is to be in service of the Lord. Christians believe in the resurrection of the body. We will live in renewed bodies in the presence of the Lord forever. For now, because the Holy Spirit dwells within us, our mortal bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, holy places in which God abides.

How, then, can a Christian justify joining this body, consecrated to Christ and filled with his Spirit, to a prostitute? Paul reminds the Corinthians, "The two will become one flesh." Our bodies are already joined to the Lord, being in one spirit with him. How could we then join that

body in immoral relations with others? We do not have the right to give ourselves over to sinful practices. We are not our own; we were bought with a price (v.19b-20): Jesus' death on the Cross. We are to glorify God in our bodies because they are temples of the Holy Spirit.

R&D What does it really mean to you, on a day-to-day basis, to think of yourself as being a temple of the Holy Spirit?

Prayer: Blessed Lord, who has taught us that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, help us to resist the temptations that assault our bodies.

Day 13

Read: 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Resisting Temptation

Paul is giving the Corinthians a little history lesson in hopes that it may do them some good. They were confident in their position as spiritual people, the people of God. But the Jews had also been confident, and Paul is saying, "Look what happened to them!" An outward display of spirituality is no assurance of salvation.

The Jews had everything going for them. They had something like baptism (the crossing of the Red Sea) and something like the Lord's Supper (manna in the wilderness and water from the rock). These were wonderful gifts, but they were taken for granted as privileges of their position with the Lord, with disastrous results. Paul minces no words in verses 5 and 8-10. The sins he warns against are desires for sexual immorality, disobedience to the Lord so we can do our will rather than His, and a discontented spirit. If we fall into sins like these, what standing do we have before God?

Self-confidence is one of the greatest dangers in the Christian life. Why do some who seem to be excellent Christians come so tragically to grief? If we knew the whole story we would perhaps find some lack of watchfulness, neglect of spiritual disciplines, and a great deal of rationalization. Then, when temptation comes, there is no strength to resist it. Resisting temptation begins with "nipping it in the bud." One of God's ways of showing us how to do that is by providing, in Scripture, a record of what happens when we don't; and Paul's "history lesson" is aimed at showing us just that.

R&D What temptations are most difficult for you to resist, and how do you deal with them?

Prayer: Blessed Lord, save us from ourselves.

Day 14

Read: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Spiritual Gifts

Startling manifestations of the presence of the Spirit had appeared in the Corinthian congregation and had apparently proved divisive. They were perhaps a source of pride to those who evidenced them and of frustration to those who had not. Paul is here attempting to give us an understanding of the nature of spiritual gifts.

Instead of building up and unifying the church, the issue of spiritual gifts seemed to be splitting the congregation. Spiritual gifts had become symbols of God's favor on individual people, making them feel superior to others who had lesser, or no known, gifts. This, of course, was just

the opposite of the purpose for the gifts, and Paul had to try to clarify the situation before it became worse.

The spiritual gifts given to each person by the Holy Spirit are for the purpose of ministering to the needs of others. This passage does not contain an exhaustive list of these gifts; we had already run into some of them in our look at Romans 12 (and see also Ephesians 4 and 1 Peter 4:10). There are a variety of gifts; they are given to different persons, and no one gift, or person, is superior to another. The gifts are all to work together for the good of the whole. They come from the Holy Spirit, and their purpose is to build up the Body of Christ.

Spiritual gifts are not for the private enjoyment of those possessing them. The question to be asked about any gift is not, “Is it impressive?” but “Is it of service to the fellowship as a whole?”

R&D Are you aware of your spiritual gifts? As a Christian, you have a responsibility to know your gifts and to use them for the benefit of others...and to allow others to use their gifts to your benefit as well.

Prayer: Use me, Lord, as an instrument of Your Holy Spirit.

Day 15

Read: 1 Corinthians 13

Paul's Treatise on Love

As we have seen, the Corinthian church was in difficulty. Members of the congregation were prideful of their spiritual gifts. As a result, instead of showing love, they were exhibiting arrogance and rivalry. Paul hits these tendencies head-on in verses 1-3.

In his writings, Paul does not often refer to the earthly life of Jesus; but, as it has often been pointed out, verses 4-8a are a perfect reflection of the character of Jesus as we see it in the Gospels. This love, which is patient and unobtrusive, seeking nothing for itself, is just what we see in Jesus. He endured the worst at the hands of men. He was not naïve, but he was willing to trust his friends, and to believe in their sincerity even when that was questionable. He never gave up his loving concern for anyone—neither for Peter who denied him, nor for Paul who persecuted him. He was not in a hurry; he was willing to wait until the fruit of his ministry would produce its intended results (v.7).

The true mark of this *agape* love is concern for others, and, in consequence, forgetfulness of self. This is the love we need to learn, first in our family (the place we hopefully realize that other people have their rights). Then, in the larger family, the community of faith of which we are a part (where there are bound to be differences of opinion and of practice). Then, in the broader world so desperately in need of love.

What is it that never passes away? Paul's answer (v.8) is the love of God. God has shown His love for His creatures in an infinitesimal number of ways over thousands of years, most especially on a Cross at Calvary. It is an eternal love. From the love of God come all things, and to that love all things return.

R&D How would you define, in fewer words than Paul, agape love?

Prayer: Pour into our hearts, Lord, that most excellent gift of love that our lives might be a reflection of the love shown by Jesus.

Day 16

Read: 2 Corinthians 1:3-7

Comfort in Troubles

Neither Jesus nor Paul ever painted the Christian life as one free from pain and suffering. Here Paul, acknowledging that, speaks of the comfort from God to offset our pain. There are undoubtedly those who believe that when God comforts us, our troubles should go away. If this were so, people would turn to God as a sort of remedy for their problems rather than out of love for Him. The type of comfort Paul is speaking of involves receiving strength, encouragement, and perseverance in dealing with our problems.

Some sufferings we have to endure come to us precisely because of our Christian faith, and these we could avoid if we gave up being Christians. Jesus even said that we might have to face death because of our loyalty to him. Just as he was a victim of injustice, cruelty, and pain, so Christians might expect to experience the same kinds of sufferings. Even though we do not, in the western world, face the possibility of physical abuse because of our faith, we increasingly are surrounded with pain caused by an indifferent and sometimes verbally abusive environment. We can't even expect to run to the comfort of the Christian Church at large because of severe disagreements concerning the basics of the faith within individual denominations.

The pain doesn't end there. Specifically because we are Christians, we have love and concern for our fellow human beings that we would not otherwise have, and this adds to our pain. And we even have the pain of the lackadaisical attitude of many of our fellow worshipers whom we believe should be more committed to their lives in Christ.

Paul's message is that, despite these many difficulties, Christ is with us. Through the Holy Spirit he is within us to comfort us in a multitude of ways. He shares our pain, and we have hope that we can grow stronger through the experience. The saying is true that "there is nothing that Christ and I together cannot handle."

R&D What suffering do you currently face for which the comfort of the Holy Spirit is needed?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, that You comfort us in sorrow, strengthen us when we falter, and love us all the time.

Day 17

Read: 2 Corinthians 4:1-12

Treasure in Clay Jars

Because of his Jewish heritage, Paul continually sees his experience of Christ within the context of God's disclosure to the Jews in their Scriptures. Therefore he speaks in confidence that he is making a truthful statement; he will speak and write only what he knows to be true from his own experience.

Paul may be puzzled by the fact that others do not so readily see this truth. This has always been a problem for Christians. Paul can only explain it as a work of Satan, the god of this world, who keeps people from faith in Christ. Whenever anything in the world—whether money, power, success, or whatever—becomes what we live for and think most worthwhile, then that has become our god. This blinds us from seeing that it is only in Jesus that God is revealed. Indeed, Paul maintains that Christ is image of God (v.4), the true likeness here on earth of the Father in heaven. We therefore acknowledge him as Lord. He, the God of creation, is the one who has acted to

illuminate our minds and hearts so that we recognize in Jesus the very nature of God revealed to humankind.

In Paul's time, large earthenware jars were commonly used for storage. The library of the Qumran community was hidden away in such jars. The pot itself was not valuable, but the contents within might be. With this analogy, Paul reminds us that we are weak vessels containing the very word of God. It is not the messengers who are important, but the message. This is of some comfort when we consider the failures of Christ's Church down through the centuries, and our own inadequacies as well.

R&D *How does it feel to be compared to a clay jar?*

Prayer: *Gracious God, we are weak vessels of Your glory; use us nonetheless.*

Day 18

Read: 2 Corinthians 5:11-17

New Creations

Paul's aim continues to be one of self-denial in order that he might preach Christ, not only in words, but also by his manner of life. Paul has previously mentioned suffering and failure as a kind of death, from which we rise to a newness of life. Here the thought is slightly different; the Christian "dies" to his former kind of life. Worldly standards are renounced. People are no longer judged on the basis of status, education, wealth, popularity, or any other superficial basis. In verse 14 Paul expresses one of his great principles: because Christ died for us, therefore in principle all mankind has "died" and has the possibility of a new start.

At one time Paul "regarded Christ" from a worldly point of view (v.16); that is, his knowledge of Christ was once an inadequate and sinful understanding. That is so no more. The knowledge he now has of Christ is of Jesus' great redemptive acts—his life, death, and resurrection on our behalf.

Verse 17 gives us the foundational statement, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation." Christians are brand new people from within. The Holy Spirit gives us new life, and we are no longer the same. It is not as though we have been reformed, rehabilitated, or re-educated; instead we are re-created, living in a vital union with Christ (Colossians 2:6-7). There is much more than an attitude change when we are converted; we become new people living a new life in Christ.

R&D *Recall your conversion and the changes that took place in your life as a result of your new life in Christ.*

Prayer: *Jesus, you are the way, the truth, and the life.*

Day 19

Read: 2 Corinthians 5:18-21

Ambassadors for Christ

Our reading for today contains the most heavily underlined markings in my Bible. Paul makes it clear that all Christians have a vital ministry of reconciliation, and that we are ambassadors for Christ to carry out that ministry. And, as though those weren't powerful enough declarations of what the Christian life is all about, he concludes (v.21), "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Mankind had been separated from God since the Fall. To bring reconciliation between God and us, Jesus died for our sins and became the channel of our reconciliation. Now we, who trust in him, have the responsibility of making this manner of reconciliation known to the world. Because we have been reconciled to God, we have the privilege of carrying this message to others, thus fulfilling this ministry of reconciliation.

An ambassador is someone commissioned by the government he or she serves to represent that government in other parts of the world. In doing so, the ambassador has the authority of the government itself. Christians are Christ's ambassadors sent with his message of reconciliation to the world. It is an awesome thought that we have this responsibility. It is an awesome thought that Christ has commissioned us for this service.

With regard to verse 21, when we accept Jesus as the Lord and Savior of our lives, we exchange our sin for his righteousness. Our sin was laid upon Christ at his crucifixion. His righteousness was poured into us at our conversion. God offers to trade His righteousness for our sin, something of infinite worth for something totally worthless. What more could anyone ask than that?

R&D In what ways do you see yourself serving as an ambassador of Christ?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you gave your all for us; help us to give our all for you.

Day 20

Read: 2 Corinthians 9:1-15

Sowing Generously

Paul makes it known that he not only has previously praised the generosity of the Macedonians to the Corinthians, he has also praised the Corinthians to the Macedonians in anticipation of what the Corinthians would do. Once more (v.3, see 8:20) he mentions that the collection for the church in Jerusalem is the responsibility of other, more fortunate churches. At the same time he is careful not to make the Corinthians feel that he is placing undue pressure on them (v.5). Paul then states some of the principles of Christian giving. It is to be done after proper consideration, not as an emotional response to an appeal. It is to be a free decision on the part of the giver, and done cheerfully.

God knows those who are generous because it is they who recognize His generosity to them (vv.8-11). It is a fact known by common experience that when a Christian gives generously and cheerfully, we find that there is still enough to meet our own needs. Thus we can say that the ministry of the giver helps the giver as much as the recipient because it makes us thankful (v.12). Our actions nearly always rebound to our joy if they are done in the glory of God. When we do good to others, we are benefited. On the other hand, if we exploit another person and we are debased, part of us is destroyed.

As we respond to God in generous giving, we become increasingly aware of God's grace towards us, of our relationship with Him and with our fellow Christians. This awareness inevitably brings with it joy, and expresses itself in adoration and praise.

R&D What has been your experience of generous giving?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for the gift to us of Yourself, which is daily renewed by the Holy Spirit. Help us, by the same Spirit, to give ourselves and what we have to those in need.

Day 21

Read: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Grace Sufficient

Perhaps we have not had experiences like those alluded to by Paul in this passage. He seems to suggest that the elation caused by such inward experiences can be dangerous. Such may feed our pride and self-satisfaction and actually weaken our dependence on the Lord. Paul maintains that the only safe thing to boast about is our weakness because that makes it essential for us to rely on God alone.

Paul makes reference to a dramatic, ecstatic experience, but does not describe it in detail nor does he pass on what was communicated to him in the vision. This experience was different from the one that brought him to faith on the Damascus road (Acts 9), which is described several times in Acts. It is more in the nature of his “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you” (1 Corinthians 14:18), as an aside written by Paul in the middle of a passage dealing with the proper conduct of worship. The purpose of all gifts is to build up the Body of Christ, and no gift approaches love in importance, as we have earlier seen in our study of 1 Corinthians 13.

No one is certain what Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” (v.7) really was. It may have been a physical ailment such as problems with his eyesight, or it may not have been physical at all. Paul sees it as an impediment laid on him by Satan; but, because God is Lord of all, it was used by God to keep Paul humble. The key is verse 9. When we have confidence in Jesus and look to him in all our troubles, we experience his power at work in the situation. It is the paradox of the Christian life that only in weakness are we strong and only in dying do we live.

R&D Have you thought of yourself as having a “thorn in the flesh”? What was/is its nature and how did/do you deal with it?

Prayer: Teach us, dear Lord, to rejoice in our weaknesses that lead us to You for our strength.

Day 22

Read: Galatians 2:11-21

Crucified with Christ

In today’s reading Paul believed passionately that Cephus (Peter) was wrong in giving way to the prejudice of the Judaizers (Christians who held to many of their Jewish beliefs and wanted to foist them upon Gentile believers). Peter evidenced this by his discontinuing his practice of eating with Gentile Christians. He had gone back to the old idea that the circumcised should not eat with the uncircumcised. For Paul it was a matter of principle. No one is made acceptable to God by observing the Law because, in fact, no one could obey the Law perfectly. Jews like Peter and Paul could only be reconciled to God in one way: by putting their entire trust and confidence in Jesus Christ. And exactly the same was true for Gentiles. What, then, was the point in requiring Gentiles to behave like Jews if the Jews themselves could be justified only by believing in Jesus? All are alike in this matter.

How serious was this breakdown in table fellowship in Antioch? It threatened the very unity of the Christian Church. Had this situation been allowed to persist and develop under which Jewish and Gentile Christians were separated from one another, there would have grown up two churches instead of one. That would have been a complete contradiction of the Gospel, which

shows no distinction because of race, culture, or social practice. God has acted in Christ to save all people who repent and believe.

Paul tells his own experience of salvation in verses 19-21. Paul had been crucified with Christ and no longer lived to himself but to Christ. The *Life Application Bible* asks, “How have we been crucified with Christ? *Legally*, God looks at us as if we had died with Christ. Because our sins died with him, we are no longer condemned (Colossians 2:13-15). *Relationally*, we have become one with Christ, and his experiences are ours.”

R&D *What does it mean to you to have been crucified with Christ?*

Prayer: *Lord Jesus, help me never forget that I no longer live, but you live in me.*

Day 23

Read: Galatians 5:13-26

Fruit of the Spirit

The glorious liberty of the children of God is not to be confused with license. The Gospel that sets us free *from* legalism sets us free *for* God.

The sinful nature is not something we can grow out of, or that is less strong in some than in others. Neither is it to be confused with sexual instincts, though it may be expressed through them. Our sinful nature is our tendency to live our lives with our own interests and pleasures in the central position. It is a life turned upon itself, which is ultimately joyless and self-destructive. In contrast, life according to the Spirit is centered on God, turned from self to self-giving love (the *agape* we looked at in 1 Corinthians 13). This sinful nature is not overcome by disciplined self-control, for that is simply our trying to do in our own strength what we can only do in weakness that relies on God’s strength (see our study of 2 Corinthians 12:1-10). Paul’s answer is a life open to God, so set on serving Him that other things drop away.

Paul tells us about the fruit that the Holy Spirit produces in Christians as we surrender ourselves to his gracious influence. He also gives us “the horrible alternative” of living by our sinful nature, as we can be expected to live if we live unto ourselves. Anyone who imagines that the Christian life is a smooth and steady progress toward heaven should meditate on Paul’s words here. There is an inner struggle going on within us (v.17). Over and over again, as we face the trials and temptations of life, we have to claim the victory that is already ours in Christ so that we may be guided by the Holy Spirit and not by the ways of the world.

R&D *What fruit of the Spirit do you see at work in your life?*

Prayer: *Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee.*

Day 24

Read: Ephesians 1:15-23

Thankful Prayer

Paul is here at prayer for his fellow Christians, and he begins with thanksgiving (v.16). What a wise and blessed way to begin our prayers for others. It is so easy to get bogged down in all the problems we and others face and that we want to pray about. How refreshing to begin, instead, in thanksgiving for all the good things that are happening and about which we have reason to be grateful.

Paul's prayer is made against the background of certain great truths about which the apostle is convinced, specifically that God has exercised His magnificent power in raising Jesus from the dead, and that the risen and exalted Christ is head of the Church which is his body. Paul's confidence in praying is based on these truths.

What is Paul asking God to give these Christians? Blessings that Christians need in every age. "A spirit of wisdom and revelation" to know God better (v.17). Then comes that wonderful plea "that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened." Paul is not talking about facts simply grasped by the mind. He means personal communion with God, a communion that is based on trust and obedience. And in this God will take the initiative in both self-disclosure (revelation) and in giving that insight which enables knowledge to be rightly used (wisdom). Paul wants us to know the hope of God's calling, and the full spiritual and moral development that God has in store for us; the riches of His glory which are ours by inheritance; and the exceeding greatness of His power, the divine power available to us for Christian living.

*R&D Do you begin your personal prayers with praise and thanksgiving? If not, give it a try.
Prayer: Open the eyes of my heart, Lord, that I may see You.*

Day 25

Read: Ephesians 2:1-10

Saved by Grace

Paul's prayer moves almost imperceptibly into a celebration of the great things God has done for these Christians (and for us!). He considers the terrible position they (and we) were in when God rescued them (and us) through His mercy and love (vv.1-3). Before coming to Christ, all were dead in our sins and those sins had cut us off from God, who is the source of all life. As a result, we were all really under Satan's power (v.2). Then, verse 4, "But because of his great love for us, God..." With these words, Paul begins to speak of God's "rescue operation." Our extremity is God's opportunity. There is a "But God" in the life of every Christian.

Note that in verses 5 and 6, three phrases are used: "made us alive," "raised us up," "made us sit." Here Paul is indicating that these are shared experiences, shared with Christ and shared with our fellow Christians. It is an illustration of how seriously he takes the truth that Christians are "in Christ" (1:1).

Into his mention of the new life in Christ, Paul has inserted "it is by grace you have been saved" (v.5), which he builds upon in verses 8 and 9. This is the ultimate truth about God's relationship with us, His love coming in the form of an undeserved favor. We too often behave like the drowning man who will not trust himself to his rescuers but hinders them by thrashing about in the water. Instead, we should commit ourselves to the grace (love, help, strength) of God in Christ and cease our foolish attempts to save ourselves.

R&D Reflect on the fact that grace (v.8) comes before the graces (v.10).

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for rescuing me; help me to be used by You in the rescue of others.

Day 26

Read: Ephesians 2:11-22

One in Christ

In most of the larger towns in the ancient world there would be a Jewish synagogue. A center of Jewish religious life, it was also a symbol of Jewish exclusiveness. The Jews were very conscious of their special relationship with God. As Paul wrote, “Theirs [the people of Israel’s] is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ” (Romans 9:4-5). As a result, the Jews looked down on the Gentiles. They spoke of the rabbinic teachings as a fence that protected the purity of their law and religion. In the temple at Jerusalem an actual wall barred the Gentiles from the inner courts.

Paul is saying that now, with the advent of Christ, all that is past. It is not that the Gentiles have been given full membership in Israel, nor that the Jews have become Gentiles, but rather that something entirely new has happened. Jesus himself is seen as a totally new type of man into whom Christians are incorporated. Through him we have *access* to the Father, and the word “access” is used to signify introducing a messenger to a king or bringing a sacrifice to God. Changing the metaphor, a totally new temple is in the process of being created, not of bricks and mortar, but of men and women now created and built into Jesus.

Put another way, Christ has destroyed the barriers we build against each other. Now that these walls have been removed, we can be in unity with people who are different from us. This is true reconciliation, a ministry to which each of us is called (2 Corinthians 5:18-21). Because of Christ’s death, we all are one (v.14); our animosity toward one another has been put to death (v.16); we all can have access to the Father through the Holy Spirit (v.18); we are no longer foreigners and aliens to God (v.19); and we are being built into a holy temple with Christ as the chief cornerstone (vv.20-21).

R&D What barriers have fallen between you and others because of being “in Christ”?

Prayer: Father God, it is an awesome thought to realize that we, through Christ, have access to You.

Day 27

Read: Ephesians 5:15-21

Fellowship

Paul begins today’s passage with caution. He says “the days are evil.” That is just as true in our day as in his. Paul wants people to awaken to the reality of the world in which they live. In the Western World today, it is easy to become complacent; and yet that is just wherein we can get seduced by the wiles of Satan. Paul wants us to keep our standards high, act wisely, and do good whenever and wherever we can.

In view of this, Paul wants to encourage healthy gatherings for fellowship and worship. The caution here is that such gatherings are often accompanied by drinking alcohol and loss of control. In contrast, Christian assemblies were to be characterized by the presence of the Holy Spirit. There is evidence in the New Testament that such meetings may have appeared rather disturbing to strangers (1 Corinthians 14). An experience of the Holy Spirit, such as might be found in charismatic worship today, is often exuberant as worshipers rejoice in God’s presence.

Christian gatherings were also to be characterized by singing. John Wesley described the *Methodist Hymn Book* as “a little manual of practical and experimental divinity.” We often remember hymns and spiritual songs long after we have forgotten sermons, and many a depressed person has found comfort and assurance from the words of a long-remembered hymn. The encouragement here is to be sure that the music at our gatherings is uplifting and inspiring, drawing us closer to the living God and to one another.

R&D Reflect on the nature of the fellowship gatherings of your community of faith. How do they compare with Paul’s teaching in today’s passage?

Prayer: Lord, make music in our hearts that we may worship You more fully day by day.

Day 28

Read: Ephesians 6:10-18

The Whole Armor of God

Paul was very conscious of the spiritual battle that was going on in his time and that is not so different in our own. Many people, including many Christians, don’t believe that there is an evil force (Satan) at work in the world. They just think there are bad people or simply unfortunate circumstances. Paul knew better, and probably you do as well. We are not to be paralyzed by fear; Satan is a defeated enemy. Nonetheless, until Christ returns, we will have spiritual battles on our hands in which we need to rely on the Lord.

Paul is not only giving counsel to the Church, the Body of Christ here on earth, but to individual Christians as well. We all need to be armed for protection. As we do battle against “the powers of this dark world,” we are able to fight in the strength of the Holy Spirit.

The armor Paul suggests is a way of reminding ourselves, preferably every morning when we awaken, of the protection God provides us: the salvation we have through Jesus’ sacrifice on our behalf, the righteousness that is our growing relationship with God, the truth that is Christ and in which we are called to live, the gospel of peace that we are to share with others, the faith in which we have confidence and (the only “offensive” weapon mentioned) “the sword of the Spirit” that is Scripture.

Furthermore, in addition to “putting on” these means of protection, we are to pray in the Spirit on all occasions. How do we do that? By making a habit of going to God in prayer concerning the situations we face throughout the day until that becomes our natural, first response to every opportunity and challenge.

R&D How seriously do you take the issue of an evil force in the world that seeks to destroy the Christian faith? What do you do to combat it?

Prayer: Lord, I commit myself into Your hands this day, body, mind, and spirit; and put on the whole armor of God: the helmet of salvation, the breastplate of righteousness, the belt of truth, the shoes of the gospel of peace, the sword of the Spirit, and the shield of faith.

Day 29

Read: Philippians 4:2-9

Rejoice!

One theme of Paul's letter to the Philippians has been unity through humility (see 2:1-11). He now applies this to the specific situation of two women in the congregation who have been quarreling with one another. Such situations should not be passed over lightly. Quarreling within a congregation is a scandal and injures the work of Christ. Paul therefore pleads that the situation be brought to an end, and calls for help in accomplishing this. Effectiveness in ministry comes not only from correct theology, but from correct relationships and behavior as well.

But the great theme of this letter is joy, summed up in verse 4. It seems strange that a man in prison (as Paul was at the time) could be telling others to rejoice. Paul's attitude teaches us an important lesson. Our inner attitudes do not have to be dependent on our outer circumstances. Paul had joy because he knew that no matter what happened to him, Jesus Christ was by his side. Thus, several times in this letter he encourages the Philippians to be joyful. They undoubtedly needed to hear such a message.

Paul encourages them and us by saying not to be anxious about anything, "but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God" (v.6). In exchange for this, Paul promises, "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (v.7). Paul is telling us to turn our problems into prayers. Through our prayers, God can guide us. Sometimes this means seeing that what we were worried about is really not significant, or He may inspire us to see a way through the problem. This gives God the opportunity to bring His peace into a troubled situation, and that can be an amazing peace!

R&D When have you been able to rejoice in a difficult situation?

Prayer: Blessed Lord, may Your peace, which is beyond understanding, keep our hearts and minds this day, in Christ Jesus.

Day 30

Read: Philippians 4:10-23

Contentment

The Philippians had shared in Paul's financial support while he was in prison, and they had always been generous in their giving. Paul was grateful because he had limited resources of his own and few friends (2:20-21). In any event, love never rejects a well-meant gift. Yet Paul wants to make it clear that his needs are not that important because he has learned the secret of contentment.

Contentment is often based on experience. Those who have lived a relatively long life have usually become more content simply because their expectations have matured. But, although Paul had certainly experienced the ups and downs of life (v.12), his contentment had its grounding in something else. For him, it had to do with trust. Those who trust in wealth, power, or prestige are either eaten up with ambition because they have not yet attained all they want, or are consumed with anxiety because, having acquired them, they fear their loss. Paul has abandoned all such false securities (3:7) and set his heart on Christ alone.

Paul is personally content because he knows from his own experience that Christ is reliable and able to sustain in every circumstance of life. But he is convinced that the same will hold true

for the Philippians (and us) as well (v.19). This does not mean, of course, that God will satisfy all our *wants*, but He will meet our real *needs*. And what we need most of all is Christ himself.

R&D *What have you learned thus far in your life about contentment?*

Prayer: *Teach us, Father, in whatever state we find ourselves, to be content.*

Day 31

Read: Colossians 1:1-14

Rescued

Letters in Paul's day would often begin with identifying the writer and the ones to whom it was being sent, followed by a greeting of peace. Here, specifically, Paul refers to himself as "an apostle of Christ Jesus." The use of this term may be because Paul wanted to establish his authority to lay down guidelines for Christian believing in this letter. The church at Colossae had been planted by Epaphras, who is now with Paul and shares in the greeting.

There are about 100 prayers in the New Testament, and this one from Paul is one of the most significant. What we are dealing with here is Paul refuting a heresy that had some support in the Colossian church. It was a variation of Gnosticism, placing undue value on the accumulation of knowledge. Paul, however, will point out in this letter that knowledge in itself is empty. To be worth anything, knowledge must lead to a changed life and right living. His prayer for the Colossians, therefore, has two dimensions: (1) that they might be filled with the knowledge of God's will through spiritual wisdom and understanding, and (2) that they would bear fruit in every good work.

In verse 13 Paul contrasts the Christians' sense of being in the light with their previous feeling of groping in the darkness. This is a common metaphor for spiritual growth, but Paul views this spiritual illumination as a certain fact of present experience and not something held out as a future hope. Christians are even *now* in the Kingdom of God; we experience liberation and forgiveness in our *present* life. Paul not only wants to correct error in the Colossian church, he wants to show these Christians the present blessing they have in Christ Jesus.

R&D *Reflect on your personal experience of coming out of darkness into the Light of Christ.*

Prayer: *Lord, shine the light of Your love into my life and into Your Church.*

Day 32

Read: Colossians 1:15-23

Supremacy of Christ

Within the Colossian church, there were several misconceptions about Christ that Paul needed to correct. Some believed that matter is evil, and false teachers argued that God would not, therefore, have come into the world in bodily form. There was also the belief that Jesus was not the unique Son of God but one of many intermediaries between God and people. Some refused to see Jesus as the means of salvation, insisting that people could only find God through special, secret knowledge.

In one of the strongest statements about the divine nature of Christ found in Scripture, Paul refutes these mistaken beliefs. Jesus is not only equal to God (Philippians 2:6), he *is* God (John 10:30, 38; 12:45; 14:1-11). As the image of the invisible God, he is the exact representation of

God. He not only reflects God, but also reveals God to us (John 1:18; 14:9). As the firstborn of all creation, he has priority and authority over all. Christ is supreme over all creation.

Put another way, here are the three fundamental affirmations Paul makes about Christ. (1) He is the *image* of God, and an “image” bears the stamp of the original. As the firstborn of all creation, he existed before the created world. Christ was no after-thought in the mind of the Father. (2) He is the head of the Church; he and the Church cannot be separated because the Church, like the universe, is subject to his leadership. (3) God in His fullness (not just a part of what is divine, as false teachers in the Colossian church had contended) was to be found in Christ.

Paul concludes by reminding the Colossians that they had once been alienated from God, but now were reconciled to Him through the grace of Christ. The way to be free from sin is to trust Jesus to take it away.

R&D How do you feel about being a steward of the world God created for you?

Prayer: Lord, help us boldly proclaim the sovereignty of Christ in a disobedient world.

Day 33

Read: Colossians 1:24-29

Hope of Glory

Today’s reading begins with a verse that has been somewhat controversial over the years. When Paul says, “I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions,” he is not saying that Christ’s suffering was inadequate to save him. Nor does he mean that there is a prescribed amount of suffering that each Christian must go through. He is saying that although his sufferings have no atoning value, they are in a sense like Christ’s in that, through them, the Gospel progresses and the Church grows. All of us, if we are faithful Christians, will likewise suffer for Christ’s sake.

The false teachers in the Colossian church taught that spiritual perfection was a secret and hidden plan that only a special few would be able to discover. It was exclusive in nature. Paul, on the other hand, proclaims the word of God in its fullness, not just part of a secret plan. He does call God’s plan a “mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations,” but that was not so that only a few would understand. It was because it was hidden in Christ who came in the fullness of time. Through Christ, reconciliation with God and freedom from sin were open to all.

Paul’s goal is that we may be made “perfect in Christ” (v.28). Here the word “perfect” means *mature* or *complete*, not “faultless.” Each of us has a long way to go in our relationship with Christ no matter how far down the road we may now be. Paul would encourage us to strive diligently to grow in that relationship, but we can never do it in our strength alone. Christians have the power of the Holy Spirit within them to lead them on the way. This is nothing less than “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (v.29).

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

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, that we live in an age and in a place where it is possible to know and serve Jesus Christ all of our lives.

Day 34

Read: 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Total Commitment

Paul had experienced a complete turnaround in his life. He had gone from being a blasphemer, persecutor, and violent man (v.13) to a totally new person in Christ Jesus. He is grateful that Jesus, in view of his past, has given him strength, considered him faithful, and appointed him to service. He concludes, “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” Paul is saying that if he could be transformed, it can happen to anyone. This statement summarizes the Gospel: Jesus came into the world to save sinners, and no sinner is beyond redemption.

Jesus’ death and resurrection on our behalf was not simply to show us how to live a better life and become better people. Jesus came to offer us salvation unto eternal life. He doesn’t ask us for a change in attitude, he calls us to total commitment to him and to his purposes for our lives.

Prior to Christ coming into our lives, we were inadequate. So was Paul. Our adequacy now lies in Christ, who would shape our lives to conform with the will of God for us. We are given a variety of tools to help us grow. These include worship, prayer, Bible study, and service to others. Total commitment means being totally committed to these means of growth. Our *direction* changes completely when we accept Jesus as the Lord and Savior of our lives, but our *progress* takes time. Fortunately, as Paul tells us (v.16), just as Christ showed unlimited patience with him, we can know that he will with us as well.

R&D If I cannot say with any degree of confidence that I am totally committed to Christ, what do I need to do about that?

Prayer: Lord, I am inadequate; help me to become capable of serving You to Your honor and glory.

Day 35

Read: 1 Timothy 4:1-16

Sound Doctrine

In today’s reading, Paul is giving some basic instructions to his young protégé, Timothy, who is leading the church in Ephesus. It was a time of religious and cultural pluralism. The Greco-Roman culture, particularly in a metropolitan area such as Ephesus, reflected a wide range of religious practices. In such situations, there is a strong tendency to adopt the beliefs and practices of the people in the area. As a result, the popular religion of the day was, for the most part, a conglomeration of ideas from a variety of sources. In other words, a world very like ours today—one that once was based on Judeo-Christian principles and is now a jumble of disconnected and often contradictory beliefs and opinions.

Paul is making it as clear as possible that Timothy needs to stand against the cultural tide by putting hope “in the living God, who is the Savior of all men” (v.10). To accomplish this, Paul challenges Timothy to rely upon the public reading of the Scriptures, preaching and teaching, and being diligent in these things. Specifically, Timothy is told to watch his life and doctrine closely and to persevere (v.16). By doing so, he would not only save himself, but also those committed to his charge. Christian leaders carry a much greater weight of responsibility than the average believer. They must answer to God, not only for themselves, but for those over whom they exercise spiritual authority.

In the confusing world in which we live, the message for us today is that we have a responsibility to know, stand for, and clearly express our faith. Furthermore, we should call our leaders to account when they are not defending the faith (“watching their lives and doctrine closely”).

R&D *In what ways can God use us to change the society in which we live?*

Prayer: *Lord, revive Your Church, beginning with me.*

Day 36

Read: 1 Timothy 6:3-10

Godliness

Paul continues to give Timothy instructions to help him pastor his flock in Ephesus by attempting to prepare him for the situations, circumstances, and challenges he will face. He begins by dealing with false teachers. He warns about those who stray from sound doctrine and who, in their conceit, lead others astray. He includes those who have an unhealthy interest in controversies and stir up trouble. This can cause constant friction within the congregation, leaving people confused and dismayed. Many congregations in our day are centers of controversy because the saving message of Jesus Christ has been lost amid “innovative” ideas that are contrary to Scripture.

Paul says that what should be sought is the great gain that comes from godliness with contentment. We are to seek spiritual growth and personal fulfillment rather than material possessions and personal power. We honor God when we focus on Him and His direction for our lives, and this brings personal contentment.

All of this leads to Paul’s well-remembered statements that “love of money is the root of all kinds of evil” (v.10). Money itself is not the problem; it is how we view it and use it. Christians who truly see what they have as belonging to God and not to themselves have an entirely different view of money compared to those who seek wealth for its own sake. Money can be used for great good if our perspective is that we are stewards of God’s riches, to be used for His purposes. But if, instead, we think our money is our own, we are in trouble; and if, by focusing on building wealth, we become wealthy, we are in even bigger trouble. Wealthy people craving greater wealth can too easily be caught in a trap that ultimately leads to despair. Believing that money is the answer to our personal problems is a deception. Our security can be found only in one place: our relationship with Jesus Christ.

R&D *How do you regard the possessions you have, as yours or His? How is this demonstrated in the way you spend your money?*

Prayer: *Lord, whereas love of money leads to evil, love of You leads to joy.*

Day 37

Read: 2 Timothy 1:3-7

Encouragement

There are many people who are encouraged by the example of Peter because Peter was so human. When we put our foot in our mouth, we can find some comfort in the fact that Peter did also. When we fail Christ, we can remember that Peter did likewise. Perhaps, then, there are those of us who can find comfort in Timothy’s failings as well. Timothy was called to be a leader during

the critical time of formation of the Christian faith, yet he apparently was timid. Paul loved him and felt the need to “buck him up,” to give him courage.

Whereas Paul’s first letter to Timothy was primarily intended to give the young man guidelines for leadership of the congregation in Ephesus, this second one is more in the nature of a loving letter from a father to a son.

Paul encourages Timothy by calling a number of things to his attention. First, he tells Timothy to “remember that he is remembered,” because Paul constantly has him in his prayers. Then Timothy is encouraged to remember that he belongs to a family of faithful people (v.5) and is not alone. Furthermore, Timothy should remember that he has been endowed with a gift from God that even timidity cannot deny. Finally, Paul is telling Timothy to remember that the Holy Spirit is life-giving, a Spirit of love that casts out fear.

We Christians can not only look forward in confidence and hope because of the power of God working in us, but we can look back on what God has done in the past in and through us to give us the reassurance we need that He will continue to lead us on the right path in the days ahead.

R&D In what ways do you need encouragement in your life right now?

Prayer: “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind” (v.7 KJV).

Day 38

Read: 2 Timothy 1:8-12

Not Ashamed

At the time of writing this second letter to Timothy, Paul was again in prison in Rome and knew he would soon die. Persecution of Christians was spreading in the Roman Empire, and Paul also knew what Timothy might be facing in the days ahead. Thus, Paul continues to encourage Timothy, telling him not to be ashamed to testify about the Lord, and to prepare him for suffering. He, like Paul, would later be imprisoned, though released (Hebrews 13:23). Paul wants to assure Timothy that, despite what sufferings he might face, God would give him strength to persevere.

This leads Paul, once more, into a recitation of the heart of the Gospel (vv.9-10): God loves us so much he sent His only Son Jesus to die for us. We can have eternal life through faith in him because he “has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality” for us all. Paul, Timothy, and all of us have been appointed to herald this Good News to a world enmeshed in sin and unable to find its way without Christ. We don’t deserve to be saved, but God did it anyway. All we have to do is accept the gift.

Our reading ends with another of Paul’s most significant statements (v.12): “Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.” These words, incorporated into a famous old hymn, can provide encouragement to us just as they must have done for Timothy as he dealt with a difficult ministry in Ephesus and impending persecution. God is faithful to His word.

R&D How do you deal with confrontation from people who do not believe in Christ or understand your commitment to him?

Prayer: Lord, help me to see others as You see them, and to love them as You love them.

Day 39

Read: 2 Timothy 3:10-17

Scripture's Role

After repeating some of the problems Paul had dealt with in his ministry, and therefore that Timothy could expect to face in his, Paul shifts his focus to the importance of Scripture and makes three primary points.

First, Timothy has known the Scriptures from his infancy. His grandmother and mother were both godly women who taught him Scripture. Like them, we have a responsibility to teach our children and grandchildren about the Bible. If children are grounded in Scripture, it will stand them in good stead all of their lives. Even if they go through a period of doubting their faith in Christ, their knowledge of Scripture can be a major factor in bringing them back to the Lord.

Secondly, Paul knew that Timothy had been convinced of the authenticity of Scripture in his life because of the people from whom he had learned it. Authenticity is seen in the lives of people who live what they profess, and we know they are worth paying attention to. We will be effective in teaching others the importance of Scripture only in proportion to the extent our lives reflect faithfulness, not only to Christ, but to what the Bible tells us about how we are to live.

Finally, Paul gives us a definition of Scripture: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (vv.16-17). Paul was, of course, talking about what we call "the Old Testament" because the New Testament was still in its formative stage. But the whole Bible is the inspired word of God. It is trustworthy and is to be applied to our lives. It does all the things Paul says it does and more. We can be very grateful that we live in a age when we can find a translation or version of the Bible that speaks clearly to us day by day.

R&D *What methods of Bible study are most helpful to you?*

Prayer: *Lord, grant that we may hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest Holy Scripture and that we may hold fast to it and it to us for the remainder of our lives.*

Day 40

Read: 2 Thessalonians 3:16-18

Conclusion

We have come to the end of Lent and the end of our study of *The Essential Paul*. Our reading for today was simply a farewell from Paul who has been very present to us over these 40 days.

In our time with Paul we have looked at his theology, shared some of his experiences, and received his practical guidance in how we Christians are to live. We have found him brilliant, poetic, and sometimes hard to comprehend. Through it all, we have perhaps gained a better understanding of this spiritual giant who is so vital to the Christian faith.

Paul was described by a Second Century Christian as "a man small in size, with meeting eyebrows and a rather large nose, baldheaded, bow-legged, strongly built and full of grace; for at times he looked like a man, and at times he had the face of an angel." Paul's letters were highly valued during his lifetime and were probably collected soon after his death. They were recognized as Scripture as early as 95 AD.

So we have, as best we can, the "total package," the essential Paul. May his words inspire, enrich, and guide us in the days and years ahead.

R&D *What have you learned from Paul this Lent that is most meaningful to you?*

Prayer: *Lord, thank You for the Apostle Paul, his life and witness.*

by Harry C. Griffith

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