



Walking by Faith

Advent Study

Day 1

Introduction

Advent is that time of year when we look forward to the coming of the Lord; but, traditionally, Christians look at it in two ways. We anticipate the birth of Jesus on Christmas day and we look forward to the Second Coming of the Lord. Our study for this Advent will encompass both of these approaches.

Turmoil in our world—and, unfortunately, we have enough of that!—causes people (Christians and non-Christians as well) to be thinking of those passages of Scripture that speak of the “last days.”

Many have looked for a chronology guiding them towards a predictable future. However, Jesus speaks sharply against that when he says, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his authority” (Acts 1:7).

What the New Testament offers, instead, is a message of hope for the anxious, a call for commitment to the uncertain, and a message of judgment for the rebellious. Most of the New Testament is written with a sense that we, as Christians, live in the “last days.” The circumstances of our world may sharpen our perceptions, but the message of the New Testament is unchanging: “You are in the last days: live like it.”

Our study will be broken into three parts. We will first consider how living in the last days affects our being witnesses for Christ. The lessons will then address how living in the last days affects our understanding of the Church. The final section will take us into the Christmas season with the theme, “Walking by Faith.” Of course, walking by faith through Advent is what this study is all about.

R&D In what sense do you regard the time in which we live as the last days?

Prayer: Who can tell what a day may bring forth? Cause me therefore, gracious God, to live every day as if it were to be my last, for I know not but it may be. Thomas a Kempis

Day 2

Read: Hebrews 1:1-4

He Has Spoken to Us by a Son

The favorite pastime for many is the reading of mystery novels. During the progress of the story, clues are presented to help lead the reader to the solution. Most of the time the reader is left in the dark with only a little understanding until the “denouement” or the final solution is revealed. It is a moment when the reader says “Aha!” and the book is brought to a satisfying conclusion.

The writer of Hebrews declares that the coming of Jesus into history is God’s “denouement.” He is the final solution to all the mystery that has gone before. Prophets could only point to that which had yet to be fully revealed. They stood at a distance from what God had chosen to manifest at a later time.

That later time was manifested with the coming of Jesus. Jesus is the last authoritative revelation of the nature of God. He is God incarnate. Jesus said to Philip the disciple, “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father” (John 14:9). Paul declared that in Jesus “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.”

To live in the time of the revelation of Jesus is to live in the “last days.” We live in that time. God continues to manifest Himself through His Son and we as Christians are heirs of that revelation. In Jesus all of our questions about God are answered. In Jesus we see a perfect expression of who God is. Jesus is God made visible.

R&D How does your understanding of God reflect the picture of Jesus in the New Testament?

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, that we are able to live in a time when and in a place where we can worship You in Spirit and in truth.

Day 3

Read: Matthew 25:31-46

Sheep and Goats

Because God has chosen to reveal Himself to us through His Son, Jesus Christ, we are people who bear a responsibility to share that revelation with others. How do we do it? What are Biblical ways to communicate the good news?

This parable indicates that a prime way of sharing the good news is through sharing ourselves and our livelihood with others: “You gave me something to eat... you gave me something to drink... you clothed me... you visited me.” These are not merely suggestions or possibilities for Christian activity; rather they are marks of what it means to be a sheep under the authority of our Shepherd.

These sheep are so filled with the compassion of Christ that they share with others not for a sense of spiritual accomplishment, but out of the overflowing of his life in them. They are just doing what Christ would do.

What is the state of our lives? Do we exhibit the compassion of sheep or the callousness of goats? Probably we exhibit both. Pray that God would grant us the compassion of Christ. Pray that God would grant us the wisdom and the courage to act upon the compassion that He gives us.

R&D When in your life are you acting like a sheep? When in your life are you acting like a goat?

Prayer: Lord, help me to discern and not to judge and above all to search out and find what is pleasing to You.

Day 4

Read: Matthew 28:16-20

Go Make Disciples

As we live in the “close of the age” the command of Jesus to “go and make disciples of all nations” becomes all the more urgent. This command was not only for the original 11 disciples but for all disciples or followers of Christ. We may or may not be ordained clergy or in a lay leadership position, but each one of us has the responsibility to speak about his or her faith.

The Apostle Peter offers this advice: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect,

keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander” (1 Peter 3:15b-16).

All of us have opportunities throughout our day to give reason for the hope that is in us because of Christ. It may be in sharing our gratefulness for God’s provision and goodness; it may be in offering to remember another in prayer. It may be in sharing something good that is happening at our local church even as others are berating the church for her many sins.

Speaking about our faith is important. We will never have such transparent lives that we need only witness by our actions and not with our lips. Not to “confess with our lips” the lordship of Jesus is to deny a basic command for disciples of Christ (Romans 10:9). Our confession may not be greeted with praise or gratefulness. We may even be abused (see above, 1 Peter 3:16). That is why we need the comfort of the promise of our Savior, “...and lo, I am with you always, even to the close of the age.”

R&D Are you willing to take the risk of speaking out for Christ today?

Prayer: Help me, Lord, to be willing always to give the reason for the hope that is in me in Christ.

Day 5

Read: Luke 3:1-6

Am I Willing to Be Alone?

God sent John the Baptist to herald Christ’s coming into the world. His appearance in Palestine was a sign that the long-promised Messiah was about to break into human history.

While he embodied the message of all of the prophets before him, he spoke with a deep sense of urgency because he knew that the coming of the Messiah was imminent. There was not much time left. Now was the time to repent and prepare for his coming.

This urgency gave his message boldness and a searing honesty that caused people to face their sins whether they wanted to or not. Many repented, but others reviled him, and Herod the tetrarch eventually had him beheaded.

John paid the ultimate price for his willingness to speak prophetically to his generation. Because he was willing, God used him to play an indispensable role in preparing the world for the coming of His Son.

Today, the Church has the same call to help prepare the world for the second coming of our Lord by preaching the good news. We fulfill the role of John the Baptist as we call people to repentance and faith.

Such a message will be greeted with joy by some and rejected or ignored by others even as the message of John the Baptist was. John was willing to pay the price of standing alone with his few disciples so as to be faithful to God. Christians today may also have to stand alone if they are willing to be faithful to God.

R&D How important does popularity play in your life?

Prayer: May I be emptied of myself, Lord, that I may abound in You.

Day 6

Read: Mark 13:3-6

False Christs

Why is it so important that we act with the compassion of Christ? Why are we called to give the reason for the hope that is in us? Why does the world need a clear and authentic expression of the Gospel? Jesus warns us that in the last days many “false Christs” would appear and lead many astray.

Today in a world of instant communication many ideas and philosophies are competing, even clamoring, for people’s attention and allegiance. The bestseller lists are constantly filled with books claiming to offer new solutions to age-old problems. And they are best sellers precisely because people are hungry; they are looking for answers.

With many “false Christs” speaking lies, we are obligated to speak the truth. We have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak the truth in love to those who so desperately need to hear it. Other voices are avidly proclaiming their messiah. Will we with quiet authority proclaim the Christ we love and adore?

If we are willing to be used by God, our actions and words will blend together into a chorus of praise that exalts our Lord and draws others to his feet: “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself” (John 12:32).

R&D How can you be bolder in your proclamation of the good news?

Prayer: Lord, give me the sensitivity, the grace and the courage to speak the truth, in love.

Day 7

Read: Jude 17-25

Kept in the Love of God

The writer of Jude tells us that in the “last time” there will be scoffers. These are those who reject the message of the Gospel and even “abuse” those who bring it (see previous lesson). Such a climate of rejection could prove to be discouraging for those who are trying to bring a message of hope and joy.

Consequently, the writer urges his readers to take responsibility for their lives: “Build yourselves up, pray, keep yourselves in the love of God, and wait for mercy.” All of us need times of refreshment, particularly when the battle is fierce. Refreshment is the best insurance against becoming a casualty.

If we are not careful, the needs of the battle will appear so great that we will begin to get an inflated sense of our own necessity. We will spend ourselves without any regard for personal refreshment. We will eventually collapse, wondering why we could not finish what we had started. The time we feel we are needed the most is exactly the time we need to insure our own rest.

Build into your schedules times of refreshment, prayer, and waiting. Then, even in the heat of the battle, you will be able to stand the test.

R&D Do you overlook your own need for times of refreshment?

Prayer: O Lord, though I often fail to show it, I know that I need to be still and know that You are God.

Day 8

Read: Revelation 2:1-4

Remembering Your First Love

During the next several sessions we will be looking at the book of Revelation 2:1—3:22.

This is the section where God addresses the seven churches of Asia Minor. We turn to this section of Scripture because understanding that we live in the last days affects our understanding of the Church. The churches in the book of Revelation can be seen as models from which we can learn.

Have you ever been around a person who has just become a Christian? There is a kind of infectious joy that pervades every conversation of such persons. They can be wildly enthusiastic. They can also be deeply grateful for their newfound sense of grace.

Jesus reproves the Ephesians for losing their initial joy, this first love. The implication is that Christians are not to mature out of this burst of devotion but grow and develop in it. Unfortunately, the Ephesians had fallen into the familiar trap of substituting ardor for adoration, works for worship, time for Christ for time with Christ.

Works, patience and endurance are not enough (v.2). God is looking for people who will love Him with all their hearts. What prompts that love? Worship; it is the only time we reserve exclusively for God. Worship reminds us of His love, His faithfulness, His forgiveness, and His ever-present grace. Worship affirms that we are united to Him with eternal cords of love and is the tangible evidence of His promise: “I will never leave you or forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5).

A church prepared for the coming of the Lord is a worshiping church.

R&D How can you prepare yourself to experience this love and joy in worship?

Prayer: I pray, Lord, that our community of faith become a more worshiping church.

Day 9

Read: Revelation 2:5-7

In the World and Not of It

The world of Ephesus was completely pervaded with pagan worship. Every guild, every trade had its own god to whom it owed allegiance. No act of commerce, politics, or culture was without its appropriate deity. One could not move successfully within the community at Ephesus without paying homage to a host of idols.

The Nicolaitans were those who wanted to mix this idolatry with their Christianity.

After all, they reasoned, if these idols are just idols, what does it matter if we give a show of obeisance to them if it helps us keep our jobs or protects our family from ridicule?

There have always been those in the Church who have wanted to compromise the message of the Gospel for the sake of social acceptance. None of us likes to be different or odd. The talk about the people of God being a “peculiar people” (1 Peter 2:9) makes most of us decidedly uncomfortable.

Jesus says that such compromise is not necessary. The promise is one of being a conqueror. How do we conquer? By allowing the adoration of our first love to guide us through the difficult decisions of life. If we determine that we love God and desire to please Him above all others, our priorities are set. His blessing is more important than anyone else’s.

A church prepared for the coming of the Lord is a church that does not bow to popular opinion.

R&D *Are you guilty of being a Nicolaitan? Explain.*

Prayer: *Blessed Lord, help us to be a church that does not bow to popular opinion.*

Day 10

Read: Revelation 2:8-11

Faithful Even to Death

The church in Smyrna was a small poverty-stricken band of believers who were being severely persecuted. Smyrna was a center for emperor worship and Christians did not bend the knee to Caesar. Some of the Christians at Smyrna had died for their faith and Jesus warns those remaining of impending imprisonment and martyrdom (v.10).

But the opening of this letter is a promise of life: “The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life” (v.8). For Christians, death is not something to be feared. Jesus conquered death. It is no longer the end of life. Death is now the gateway to eternal life. Death is not an end but a door.

How would we feel if God spoke to us and told us we were going to die? What changes would we make in our lives? How would we treat people? What would we do? The message of the Smyrnan letter to us is: live like that right now!

All people regardless of their faith do not know how long they will live. But Christians who are prepared can meet the unexpected with an expectancy and a joy that is supernatural. He who overcame death will guide us through the gateway of eternity “from strength to strength in the life of perfect service.”

A church prepared for the coming of the Lord is a church that has faced death and is not afraid.

R&D *Are you prepared to die?*

Prayer: *Give me strength, Lord, to face death unafraid.*

Day 11

Read: Revelation 2:12-17

Compromise within the Church

The situation at Pergamum was similar to that at Ephesus. The workings of the city were all placed under the authority of various deities. The temptation to participate in pagan feasts and mix idolatry with Christianity was pervasive.

But the scenario at Pergamum was different from that at Ephesus. The church at Pergamum was divided. Some of her members were faithful, even to death, as was Antipas. Others, however, had accepted the practice of the Nicolaitans by participating in the pagan festivals along with their Christianity.

The church at Pergamum needed to be reminded that their allegiance was to only one Lord. Jesus calls them to repentance. If they do not repent, he will make war against them with the sword of his mouth. Who will deliver them if God is their enemy?

We bear a responsibility to watch out for our fellow Christians to see that they do not fall away. More than one Christian has buckled under the extraordinary pressures of daily life because no one stood with him to help bear his burdens. It was sinful Cain who asked, “Am I my brother’s

keeper?” What Christ teaches goes beyond this: I am not my brother’s keeper; I am my brother’s brother.

A church prepared for the coming of the Lord is a church that makes a priority of the ministry of encouragement.

R&D Who can you encourage today? How will you do it?

Prayer: Lord, help our community of faith to be a place of encouragement.

Day 12

Read: Revelation 2:18-23

Obedient to Repentance

The church in Thyatira is commended for her love, faith, service, and patient endurance. In fact, this church has grown so that “your latter works exceed the first.”

But Jesus speaks his strongest words against a Jezebel in their midst who refuses to repent. In the Old Testament, Jezebel was the wife of King Ahab. She was a pagan who imported her gods into Israel and encouraged the people of Israel to sacrifice to her gods and participate in cult prostitution.

Obviously, this person in the church considered herself a religious leader who encouraged her followers to participate in the pagan festivals that pervaded the city. She had convinced them that such participation was perfectly acceptable in spite of the warning others had given her to the contrary (“I gave her time to repent, but she refuses” v.21).

What is God to do with someone who refuses to heed His warning? He promises complete and final judgment. Such an example should cause us to consider our own laxity in dealing with the sin that invades our lives. The word of the psalmist declares: “Today if you hear his voice, harden not your hearts” (Psalm 95:7-8).

A church prepared for the coming of the Lord is a church that is eager to repent.

R&D Have you put off facing and dealing with a particular sin in your life? Why are you waiting?

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to be a church ready and willing to repent.

Day 13

Read: Revelation 2:24-29

The Promise of Authority

To the rest of the church in Thyatira Jesus offers a word of encouragement: “Hold on!” These Christians were tempted from both within the church as well as outside. They were few in number. Jesus encourages them not to lose what they had acquired in faith.

The key word is endurance, that tenacious ability to continue without yielding. Such endurance is what holds Christians together even in the midst of extreme difficulty. They know that their present circumstances are not the final outcome. God will prevail. He is the first and the last. He has already overcome every enemy; and in the final Day of Judgment He will raise up His Church to the place of victory and authority He has given to His Son.

When that kind of endurance is worked in our lives we know that we can face any hardship because we know that God has the final victory. Even death itself is the passageway through which we rule and reign with Christ. “Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus

Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:57).

A church prepared for the coming of the Lord is a church that has learned to endure.

R&D *How will you be reminded to endure when life gets difficult?*

Prayer: *Help us, Lord Jesus, to be a church prepared for your coming.*

Day 14

Read: Revelation 3:1-3

Wake Up!

Sardis was a city with a glorious past but a decadent present. At one time she had been the capital of Asia and had grown wealthy both through commerce and through militarily strategic position.

But while Sardis had retained her wealth, her power and prominence were gone.

She had degenerated into a city that lived in the glory of the past. “No city of Asia at that time showed such a melancholy contrast between past splendor and present decay as Sardis” (William M. Ramsay, *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia*).

This melancholy attitude has invaded the church. A church, once vibrant and full of life, had been lulled into laxity. Their zeal for God was a thing of the past.

How many Christians, how many churches have begun full of vibrancy and enthusiasm only to be lulled into the sleep of complacency? How many Christians, how many churches can only talk of past spiritual experiences rather than present spiritual realities? How many Christians, how many churches can only share what God has done for them in the past rather than what God is doing with them in the present?

Jesus says, “Wake up!” The situation is not hopeless. There is still time to be renewed. Anyone who comes to God, openly acknowledging his sin, will surely be forgiven. Anyone asking God for strength to do His will, will surely receive it. Anyone who asks to be used by God will surely be empowered for service.

A church prepared for the coming of the Lord is a church that is awake to the possibilities of the present.

R&D *Do you relive the spiritual experiences of the past rather than acknowledging the presence of God in the present?*

Prayer: *Help us, O Lord, to be a church awake to the possibilities of the present.*

Day 15

Read: Revelation 3:4-6

Declared Acceptable in Christ

Oh, to be declared worthy by our Lord! Oh, to be received into God’s eternal presence clad in the white garments of his purity. Oh, to know that our names are written indelibly in the book of life and that Jesus speaks our names before the majestic chorus of heaven.

These are the promises to those who are alive in Christ. Are we alive in Christ? Have we acknowledged his lordship and given ourselves to the doing of his will? If we have, these promises are our own. Christ has given them to us out of his own free grace which he lavished upon us as his own brothers and sisters.

Great peace comes to the Christian who knows that he has been declared acceptable in

Christ Jesus. The struggle with condemnation is over. Guilt has been washed away by the cleansing power of divine forgiveness. We are free to enjoy his love even as we stand in awe of him. Death has been swallowed up in victory.

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

A church prepared for the coming of the Lord is a church that enjoys the power of the forgiveness of God.

R&D Do you struggle to accept God’s forgiveness?

Prayer: Lord, may we be a church that lives in the power of Your forgiveness.

Day 16

Read: Revelation 3:7

God is Sovereign

Philadelphia was situated at the crossroads of Asia Minor’s major highways. It was located on a high plateau and was extremely prosperous. It became a strong fortress and the symbol of political and military power.

In the midst of this city resided a church that had remained faithful to God. The origin of this church is unknown. But the church continued to remain faithful long after the rest of the territory had come under Muslim control in the 14th century.

Because this was a city of power, Jesus speaks with symbols which declare his ultimate power and authority. He presents himself as one who speaks truth and not falsehood. He is the author and inheritor of the throne of King David (an allusion to his place as Messiah). He maintains complete sovereignty over the eternal destiny of the peoples of the earth. He is Lord.

When we see such a complete picture of the authority of Jesus, we begin to comprehend that no power can successfully stand against him. He is in complete control. As his followers we have been given the privilege of living under his most gracious rule. There can be no higher honor than to live in the service of the King.

A church prepared for the coming of the Lord is a church that acknowledges the sovereignty of God.

R&D To what extent can you see the sovereignty of God in the midst of world events?

Prayer: Help us to be a church that acknowledges the sovereignty of God by living under His most gracious rule.

Day 17

Read: Revelation 3:8-13

Christ Is for Us

It is out of his sovereignty as King that Jesus commends this church for her faithfulness.

He promises her complete victory and protection even as the world approaches the “hour of trial.” He says this about the church at Philadelphia: its enemies will acknowledge that God loves them and fall at their feet. He declares that He will give them a place of security and authority in His kingdom (v.12) and no disturbance will ever force them out.

These promises (as all of the promises in the New Testament) are not just for the church at

Philadelphia, but for all Christians who choose to remain faithful to God in the midst of difficulty. “If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son but gave him up for us all, will He not also give us all things with him?” (Romans 8:31-32).

God has chosen to be faithful to His people and in that faithfulness we rejoice. His loving-kindness is better than life itself (Psalm 63:3) and we respond in praise to Him who keeps us by His sovereign power.

A church prepared for the coming of the Lord is a church that experiences the provision of God.

R&D *What are some of the ways in which God has been faithful to you?*

Prayer: *Lord, You provide for us in so many ways; help us always to remember Your providence and to praise Your name.*

Day 18

Read: Revelation 3:14-18

Material and Spiritual Poverty

The city of Laodicea was an important center of trade and commerce. It produced a fine black wool which was the source of much of its wealth. The city had strong banking assets and a famous school of medicine. It produced a special salve famous for the curing of eye diseases.

The church at Laodicea was content with its position in the city and felt that it was under the blessing of God. God, however, had a different opinion of the Laodicean church, and used the very sources of the city’s wealth as symbols for that church’s spiritual poverty.

The church at Laodicea had accepted the mistaken notion that financial prosperity was a sign of God’s favor. Jesus counters that notion when he declares that the only real riches are those in the kingdom of God.

So long as the members of the Laodicean church were deluded as to their true spiritual condition, they were absolutely useless to God. Jesus says that he will spew them out of his mouth.

Many today are also under the mistaken notion that material prosperity is a sign of God’s blessing and are, thus, being blinded to their true spiritual condition. According to the New Testament, “laying up for yourselves treasures on earth” is hardly a sign of God’s favor.

Discerning our true spiritual condition is the fruit of a heart that is open to God’s touch and is wary of its own bias towards flattery. God will reveal our hearts if we are open to His leading and will never allow those who truly desire to follow Him to remain deceived.

A church prepared for the coming of the Lord is a church that is discerning as to its own spiritual condition.

R&D *Do you have spiritual accountability? If not, ask a fellow Christian to help you see your own “blind spots.”*

Prayer: *Help us, O Lord, to be a church that is discerning of its own spiritual condition.*

Day 19

Read: Revelation 3:19-22

Disciplined for Our Good

Ecclesiastes declares, “It is better for a man to hear the rebuke of the wise than to hear the

song of fools” (7:5). So it is with those who seek after God. While none of us likes to be reproved, it is the sure sign that God is working His perfect will within us.

How do we respond to the discipline of God? We respond by forsaking the sin He brings to light.

The quicker we are to obey, the easier it is to rejoice in His mercy. The slower we are to respond to His direction, the harder it is to appreciate His love.

Living under the discipline of God can be painful because it reveals the secrets of our hearts; but it is also glorious because we are constantly reassured that He is working in us His perfect will. We know we are not abandoned but are rather children in the family of God.

A church that is prepared for the coming of the Lord is a church that is conscientiously under discipline.

R&D How can you tell if you are under God’s discipline right now? Explain.

Prayer: Lord, we are of little value to You unless we are living in Your will, and that requires discipline.

Day 20

Read: Hebrews 10:35—11:1

Confidence in the Future

As God begins to work in our lives, we are constantly being moved away from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from the seen to the unseen. This journey can either be terrifying or hopeful depending on who we believe is leading us. If we know that God, who is everlasting love, is working His purposes out within us, we can walk by faith knowing that He will lead the way and never forsake us.

The more God moves us along, the greater our trust in Him. We learn by experience that He is faithful. He has proved Himself faithful to us in the past so we have confidence for the future.

There is a joy in knowing that we are being guided along by His unseen hand, moving toward that great reward (v.35) that He has already promised us by faith.

Such is the path of the Christian, walking by faith and not by sight, trusting in a God whom we cannot see to work out His plan in circumstances that we can see. It is a real adventure.

Sometimes we doubt and are afraid; but it is appropriate to remember that we are forgiven. God’s plan for us is always larger than our fears.

We know we can trust Him. We know He will lead the way.

R&D Can you look back on your life and see that God is leading? Explain.

Prayer: Everliving God, grant us the strength of faith never to waiver in our love and service of You.

Day 21

Read: Luke 1:68-79

Coming out of the Dark

The glory of this most famous song is the declaration of the coming of the Messiah as a free gift. God has chosen to visit His people. Out of the timeless purposes of God will come the desire of the ages. God has honored the words of His prophets. His promises, moving from eternity into time, have created a new way for the human race to be united with the God of heaven. God

will bring us out of darkness by His glorious good news and we will walk in the way of peace.

He has not abandoned us. We are not orphans. He has heard the cry of our hearts.

As we wait for Him, our hearts pulsate with the expectancy of His imminence. We know He is coming! We know He is on His way. Light is breaking forth and casting out the darkness. He who is the light of the world is near.

Do not give up! He who formed you from the foundations of the world has called you to be His own. Do not give yourself over to the darkness that is dying. Rather reaffirm that you belong to Him and that He will be triumphant. "I am convinced that he who has begun a good work in you will continue it until the day of Jesus Christ." (Philippians 1:6).

The shadow of death is receding. The powers of darkness are yielding. Lift up your heads, you mighty gates. The King of glory draws near.

R&D Does this song speak to the needs of your heart? In what way?

Prayer: Shine on our hearts, Lord Jesus.

Day 22

Read: Philippians 2:5-11

Christmas Day

In this hymn to Christ, Paul calls Christians to live a life of faithful humility after the pattern of our Lord. Such a life of "self-emptying" runs completely counter to our own tendencies to self-preservation.

Christ laid aside all notions of self-preservation with an extravagant pouring out of himself into humanity. We celebrate this day because he gave himself so freely.

For the giving of Christmas to have real Christian meaning, one must move beyond the exchanging of equal presents to the example of Christ who gave everything to win the prize of a redeemed human family.

Today, let us look for ways to give that are not expected and cannot be returned in kind. Let us celebrate the birth of our Lord by giving that which expresses his love and rejoice that we follow in the steps of our master.

R&D How can you give to someone in a way they would not expect?

Prayer: Lord, we know it is more blessed to give than to receive; help us to give to You praise and to others selfless love.

Day 23

Read: Luke 2:1-7

Mary as Model

Think of Mary: full of wonder, fear. A child carrying a heavy load, God, come in the flesh. "Let it be to me according to your word."

Mary is a model for all who would walk by faith. Surely there was no one who had to walk more by faith than she. Where was her model? Who was her example? Who had gone before her to prepare the way? No one. There was no precedent to prepare her for this unique task. Who could anticipate becoming the mother of our Lord?

In our own day we often feel isolated and alone. The workings of God within us often seem

strange and unusual. Has anyone ever felt like I feel? Has anyone ever walked this way before? Yes. Think of Mary. No one could have felt more isolated than she; no one could have taken on a more difficult or threatening task.

Let us rejoice for one who so willingly gave herself to the impossible, the outrageous, the unknown. Let us give thanks for one who walked alone so that we could walk with Him always. Because of her faith, we can say, "God is with us" and rejoice!

R&D *Does the example of Mary help you face uncertainty in your life? Give an example.*

Prayer: *Lord, give me courage to bear Jesus to those with whom I come into contact.*

Day 24

Read: Matthew 23:34-39

Stephen

In this passage Jesus reviles the hypocrisy of the Pharisees who continued to practice with scrupulousness the ceremony of the Law yet continued to murder the prophets God sent to call them to Himself. For them, ceremony had replaced relationship.

This passage is used in the lectionary as pointing to the death of Stephen who was martyred by the Pharisees even as they continued to hold up the importance of the Law.

People are always hurt when form or ceremony becomes more important than human need. Jesus never hesitated to break the Law when the outcome would be to draw an individual nearer to God. Not that he endorsed lawlessness, but, in his eyes, people were more important.

Many times I can get so caught up in my schedules and my routines that they become for me a kind of law. My life begins to be motivated strictly by my appointments and obligations so that I do not take the time I need to be with people who come unexpectedly.

It is an act of faith to trust that God sends these people as well as those on a schedule, and to trust that all He desires for us to do will be accomplished. But it is better for us to act in faith than to play the Pharisee with one whom God has sent our way.

R&D *Can you let go of your schedule and make room in your life for God's surprises?*

Prayer: *We thank You, Lord God, for the example of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, who prayed for those who were stoning him; may we be so generous in our thoughts and prayers for those who oppose our faith in You.*

Day 25

Read: John 1:1-9

John the Apostle

John speaks to us with an elegant preciseness that is the fruit of a life in intimate contact with Christ. He extends an invitation to joy, the joy of living in union with God and in fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ.

What is the price of that joy? The price is a willingness to come out of the darkness, to let go of all deception, and to face the truth about ourselves and about God. Unfortunately, many are not willing to pay that kind of price, even in the Church. There are many who prefer their own delusions rather than the bright reality of the purity of God.

But for those who are willing to face themselves and their God, God grants to them the joy

of real human communion and forgiveness from Jesus.

If we are willing to walk by faith into the light of God's presence, He will wash us clean by the blood of His Son and set us free from all that binds us.

R&D Are there places in your heart you are hiding from God? Will you yield that place to Him now?

Prayer: We pray that we may walk in the light of Your truth, O Lord.

Day 26

Read: Nehemiah 1:1-11

A Time for Prayer

Regardless of our political persuasion, we have to admit that we are a nation in desperate need of prayer. We are not only in an economic crisis, our moral crisis is even greater. We are also in danger of losing elements of freedom that we have long held dear. Even the Christian faith is being questioned and sometimes subjected to ridicule.

Although Nehemiah lived in a very different age, and the crises he faced were very different from our own, the heart of his prayer is identical to what should be our prayer today. The walls of Jerusalem lay in ruins and its gates had been burned down. The people were in great trouble and disgrace, and Nehemiah planned to take his appeal to the king that he and others be allowed to return to Jerusalem to deal with the situation.

Similarly, our "walls" are in disrepair and our "gates" are down. We, too, need to confess our sins, for we have not followed the Lord as we should have done. We are like a people scattered and in disarray. We, too, need to be calling on the Lord to forgive us and to show His strength and mighty hand.

With these thoughts in mind, we have put together a prayer for our nation that will be tomorrow's lesson—a good way to end this year and prepare for the next. Although the prayer laments our own waywardness and need to repent, it tries not to dwell on how bad things are but to take a realistic look at where we are, how much we need our God, and what He would have us do in these times.

We commend tomorrow's prayer for your regular use.

R&D How are you currently praying about the situation in our nation? Will having a formal prayer for this use be helpful to you?

Prayer: Lord, hear our prayer.

Day 27

Prayer for the Nation

"If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14). Gracious God, for us to pray effectively about the situation in which we find ourselves in this nation, our hearts need to be pure. We desperately need to heed these words of Scripture because we are a nation of people who have largely turned from You, are not humble, do not seek Your face, and follow wicked ways. Please forgive us, Holy

Father, and set us on a new path of praise and worship of You and service in Your Holy Name through Your Blessed Son Jesus Christ.

“Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?” (Hebrews 12:7). “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline” (Revelation 3:19). Your purpose in discipline, Lord, is to bring Your people back to You. We, like lost sheep, have gone astray. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts rather than seeking You in all things. Forgive us, Dear Lord, and put us on the path of truth, faith, and obedience, that we may do Your will.

In Acts 16 we experience the story of Paul and Silas in prison. They have been unfairly charged, stripped and severely beaten. As they sit in their cell, instead of feeling sorry for themselves, they pray and sing hymns to God. There follows a mighty showing of force by God as He not only frees Paul and Silas but also leads the jailer and his family to faith. Lord, let this be a lesson to us that, in spite of bad times, You are in charge and can work Your miracles in any situation. Help us not to focus on the problems of the day but, instead, to rely on You to do Your ultimate will even in the worst of times.

“But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing” (2 Corinthians 2:14-15). Blessed Lord, help us never to forget that we are Your people here on earth, ambassadors of the Kingdom of God. You lead us in proclaiming Your love among all people. You are not looking for us to succeed, but simply to be obedient. When we are yoked with You, You carry the bulk of the load. Help us to be channels of Your love.

“See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, for the first things have passed away” (Revelation 21:3b, 4). Lord, we know how Scripture ends. Help us never to be so discouraged that we fail to rely on Your promises and Your truth. In the midst of it all, Lord, help us to remember that the victory is Yours. All else pails in the Light of Christ. Alleluia.

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