



# Easter Season Devotional Guide

## 50 Day Easter Journey—Resurrection to First Fruits

This devotional series proposes to take you through the Easter season toward a fuller appreciation of the meaning of Easter. In Easter we celebrate the risen Lord. We look at the character of Jesus' life and God's expectation for our lives, as well.

Scripture quotations have been taken from the Contemporary English Version, with a slight change to use the proper name *Yahweh* where the CEV uses the traditional "LORD" in place of God's personal name in the Hebrew Scriptures. These devotions are not simply meditations on the cross. They are a challenge to encounter Jesus and follow in the path of discipleship.

This devotional guide is a follow-up companion to a 40-Day Lenten Devotional Guide. This one will be written for daily devotions for each day of the week, including Sundays, however. The previous guide can be found at: [http://www.theotrek.org/resources/lent/2009-02-25\\_Lenten\\_Readings.pdf](http://www.theotrek.org/resources/lent/2009-02-25_Lenten_Readings.pdf) or in html format at [www.theotrek.org/resources/lent/lent\\_00.shtml](http://www.theotrek.org/resources/lent/lent_00.shtml).

I have chosen to alternate texts from the Old and New Testaments. As Jesus proclaimed, the Jewish Scriptures speak of him, as he is the God of the Hebrews, come to earth in flesh and blood. We can see in the Hebrew texts the truth of God who later came in Christ Jesus, died, and rose again to offer us redemption and reconciliation. While this message is not as clear in the Old Testament, once we have encountered the character of God in Jesus Christ, God's identity becomes clear in the Hebrew Scriptures.

It is my prayer that we will better come to know Christ Jesus and his claim on our lives as we study and reflect on these passages together.

In His service,

Christopher B. Harbin

Easter 2009

## ***First Day—Easter Sunday:***

***“The apostles thought it was all nonsense, and they would not believe. But Peter ran to the tomb. And when he stooped down and looked in, he saw only the burial clothes. The he returned, wondering what had happened.” Luke 24:11-12***

Luke confirms Marks account that the women fled the empty tomb in fear. They said nothing about an angel—at least not at first. Who would believe them, anyway? Perhaps only after meeting Jesus were they emboldened to speak to the Eleven. Obviously, they should not have expected anyone to believe them. They were merely women and so did not count for much in First Century Palestine. When they did say speak, they weren’t even greeted by doubt. Their witness was brushed aside by all eleven apostles. After all, a self-respecting man would not give much credit to the drivel of a handful of hysterical females. They should have expected as much. They probably did.

Even if Jesus had given women value and even called both Mary and Martha to sit at his feet among the Twelve, such a message of a woman’s equality before God had not taken hold. Old habits die hard. Old ways of thinking persist. When we are under stress, we revert to the norms of youth, even those we once rebelled against. The men foolishly brushed aside the women’s report as unworthy of their attention. After some consideration, Peter stood up and rushed out to the tomb. He didn’t really believe the women, but he resolved to check out the situation for himself. He decided that maybe there was some kind of story at hand, even if he did not accept their interpretation of events.

Peter had been told that Jesus was alive. The women reported seeing angels as well as Jesus. They had been commissioned to tell Peter and the others that Jesus was alive. They had been sent with the reminder that Jesus had foretold his rising from the dead after three days. The women gave their report, despite the disciples’ unbelief and brushing them aside. Peter was fully warned, but he was still unprepared for finding the tomb empty. He had been told that Jesus was alive, but even then he did not accept it after seeing the tomb empty.

He left the tomb amid inner turmoil. The women's report was not one he could accept. He did not find Jesus' body where it should have been. The guard was no longer there. He didn't know what to think. He did not know what to do. Nothing made sense. Jesus was not supposed to have died. Once dead, it was beyond imagining that he would come back to life. There was little thought to giving the women's message credit. On the other hand, he had no alternate explanation for the facts before him.

The tomb was empty, the burial clothes remaining alone. If Jesus' body had been stolen, why remove the burial cloths first? It was a lot of trouble to wrap a body. To remove the wrap was more difficult, yet. At least they would keep the thieves cleaner if while they were intact. There was no body, and only the word of a few hysterical women for an explanation. It would take more to convince Peter that Jesus was alive. He would have to set aside so many of his preconceived notions to accept the reality of the resurrection. He would have to take Jesus on Jesus' own terms, no longer in his mold of a political messianic reign in the halls of human power. Are we ready to hear that Christ Jesus is alive, accepting him on his chosen terms?

**Ask God to clarify where you may be forcing Jesus into a mold of your choosing.**

***“Lord, help me to honor you as who you are, not who I want you to be.”***

## ***Second Day:***

***“Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, ‘Look what you’ve done! Now I’m in real trouble with the Canaanites and Perizzites who live around here. There aren’t many of us, and if they attack, they’ll kill everyone in my household.’ They answered, ‘Was it right to let our own sister be treated that way?’” Genesis 34:30-31***

Jacob and Leah’s daughter, Dinah, had been raped by a man who then decided he wanted her for his wife. Dinah’s brothers, Simeon and Levi, were rightfully angry. They hatched a scheme to have all the men of the offending tribe circumcised in anticipation of the proposed wedding. Without their father’s knowledge, while all the men were sore and incapacitated, the two brothers sneaked into the village and slaughtered all the men. The other brothers carried off the tribe’s plunder, along with the herds of animals, the women, and the children. Eventually, word reached Jacob’s ears, and too late, he confronted them.

The brothers had been indignant. They were angry. They had wanted some kind of response that would expunge the violence against their sister and her dignity. They were afraid Jacob would simply let things lie and overlook the travesty wreaked upon Dinah and her family’s honor. They were concerned the proposal of marriage would be allowed to hide the stain of violence their sister had suffered. They wanted revenge. They wanted retaliation. They wanted to somehow reverse time and expunge all knowledge of Dinah’s experience.

Killing the perpetrator was not enough in their eyes. Dinah was still injured. Killing his father along with him was also insufficient. It did not make up for the violence committed. Killing the perpetrator and his father would cause problems with their neighbors and the rest of the tribe. They had decided on wiping out the whole tribe in retribution for the misdeed and the tribe’s failure to make amends. Interestingly enough, the offer of marriage was exactly what Mosaic Law would later stipulate as appropriate—marriage with no option for divorce. The man would be required to care for the woman for the rest of her life.

What did Simeon and Levi really accomplish? With the tribe killed, Dinah’s memory was still intact. The pain of her experience was still lingered. She could not just ignore it now that the perpetrator and his kin were dead. It was still real. Furthermore, as Jacob said to her brothers, the rest of the nations among whom they lived would likely seek retribution for the slaughter enacted by Simeon and Levi.

There is just seemingly no end to cycles of violence and revenge. Retribution is never sufficient. Causing pain to another in return for pain we experience just does not erase our injuries. How often we hear reports of court proceedings enacted to cause pain against the other party for perceived wrongs. We consider retribution through the courts as justice. When Christ Jesus was flogged, shamed, and killed, however, his response was wholly different. “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!” Will we ever learn to love and forgive after the example of Christ, or will we sit back like the two brothers, hiding behind the line that something had to be done.

**Give your hurt, anger, and pain to the One who died for you. Allow his mercy to be yours.**

***“Lord, help me let go of my desire for retaliation, accepting grace as your way of life.”***

## ***Third Day:***

***“Even when we were God’s enemies, he made peace with us, because his Son died for us. Yet something even greater than friendship is ours. Now that we are at peace with God, we will be saved by his Son’s life. And in addition to everything else, we are happy because God sent our Lord Jesus Christ to make peace with us.” Romans 5:10-11***

God’s way of dealing with enemies is not our standard procedure. We want merchant ships stocked with weapons with which to blow pirates out of the water. We look to security forces to kill rampaging gunmen, counting such personnel as heroes. Our idea of dealing with enemies is to destroy them in their bunkers with air strikes from afar. God’s idea is to offer peace by dying on their behalf.

Peace at the initiative of the offended is the message of the cross. Through the cross Jesus took the ultimate step to offer reconciliation to those acting to kill him and eliminate his call for love, grace, and reconciliation with God. Somehow, we have accepted that it was fine for Jesus to lay down his life to offer us peace with God. That was a spiritual issue. That was enacted by God for our redemption. We seem to have more trouble with following Jesus' example of peace in our own lives.

Could Jesus' call to peace really be intended to take root in our lives and actions? Are we really to do something with Jesus' example of giving his all on behalf of those who act as enemies of God's redemptive purposes?

Paul says the point of Jesus' death was to create reconciliation between God and ourselves. It was God's initiative to offer peace through Jesus' acceptance of death on the cross. As God took this unmatched step to bring us into relationship through Christ, we can be at peace with God—no longer the enemies for whom Christ died. Instead of enemies, we become more than friends in peaceful relationship with God, joined with the Almighty because of God's tremendous love.

It is not we who make peace with God. It is rather God who took the first step in making peace with us. Though God is the offended party in the relationship, and though God was the one with the power to dictate the terms of agreement, all was done for us in love. God took upon himself the brunt of our aggression and violence. This was no theoretical dislike for God, but the physical and emotional action of beating, whipping, jeering, mocking, and nailing him up to die on a cross. There are many injuries for which we might forgive someone, but this seems hardly the kind of aggression we would overlook. We would be more prone to try the crowds for war crimes and see them hanged as accomplices to aggravated assault.

God accepted the cross as an avenue to peace. The message was something to the tune of, “I offer you grace, mercy, and forgiveness, even when this is how you treat and mistreat my offer of love. From the pain of the cross and the brunt of your rejection, I have prayed and pleaded for you. I intercede on your behalf and offer you love to match the depths of your aggression toward God. If you would simply come to me, I have prepared a place for you by my side.” Are we ready to set aside all the ways we oppose God to live at peace with the Almighty as he so deeply desires?

**Give your hurts and pain to God, allowing the love and peace of Christ to flow through you.**

***“Lord, help me embrace your example, offering the same forgiveness you gave from the cross.”***

## ***Fourth Day:***

***“So the king said to them, ‘No one could possibly handle this better than Joseph, since the Spirit of God is with him.’ Then the king told Joseph, ‘God is the one who has shown you these things. No one else is as wise as you are or knows as much as you do.’” Genesis 41:38-39***

This has got to be the strangest part of Joseph’s story. Joseph was a foreigner. Joseph had come to Egypt as a slave. Joseph had been imprisoned under accusation of improper dealings with Potiphar’s wife. Joseph was still a prisoner. Foreigners with criminal records were the last to be considered for a position of power, much less when they were slaves. Now all this was being set aside and he was given the position of second in command of the largest world power of the day!

This was a novel step, indeed. Sure, Pharaoh liked the idea of taxing all agricultural produce at a twenty-percent rate. Any excuse for that would help the coffers of Egypt immensely, even if Joseph’s interpretation were completely invalid. It was not so unexpected for Pharaoh to take Joseph’s word as one on which to act. It was in his best interest, regardless of what the future might really hold. The dream and its interpretation could be shared at least as a great excuse to levy more taxes than before. The startling part of the story is that Pharaoh picked Joseph to administer the program.

Likely, Pharaoh had heard of Joseph’s career as steward for Potiphar and the jailer by now. While Joseph was being shaved, bathed, and dressed to present himself before Pharaoh, Pharaoh had taken the time for a briefing on Joseph’s story and credentials. He doubtless would know something about him before Joseph was dragged into the throne room to offer an interpretation for Pharaoh’s dreams. Perhaps that was enough to give Pharaoh cause to place him as steward of agriculture in the years leading up to the drought that Joseph was forecasting. Surely, however, Pharaoh had many other capable hands already in the court who would do an adequate job and whose allegiance was already determined.

Why take a foreigner, an outsider, and place him in such an exalted position? Joseph didn't even serve the gods of Egypt, the most powerful nation in the world. Everyone considered the power of a nation the result of the power of their gods. So what, that Joseph served some other god? There was little reason for Pharaoh to consider such a deity of any importance in contrast to the deities of Egypt.

Maybe Pharaoh took Joseph as a symbol figure to help with the change of taxation. Perhaps he was to be the poster child for the idea. If anything went wrong with collecting the 1/5 tax, it would be easy to blame the foreigner and absolve Pharaoh’s complicity. Maybe, then, it was some slick political maneuvering—“It’s that foreigner who is responsible for taxing of your agricultural produce! He’s the one who said it was necessary!” Joseph would make an easy scapegoat if things turned sour. After all, there was no one in Egypt to care for his plight or take his side in a power play.

God took the least likely candidate and placed him in a position of immense power. Interpreting the dream would have been sufficient to save the lives endangered by the coming famine. God took Joseph to the height of power in Egypt, however, to display his character above the gods of Egypt.

**Determine how God would use you to point to Him from your circles of influence.**

***“Lord, help me serve you as faithfully as Joseph, pointing one and all to your presence.”***

## ***Fifth Day:***

***“This good news is about his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ! As a human, he was from the family of David. But the Holy Spirit proved that Jesus is the powerful Son of God, because he was raised from death.” Romans 1:3-4***

We are so accustomed to understanding Jesus as God in human flesh that we may overlook the importance of Paul’s words. The mystery of the incarnation has become an assumed fact for so many of us. We quote Scriptures, sing hymns, and repeat messages pointing to God being present in Christ Jesus so often we may forget that this is something novel, special, and completely unexpected in Paul’s day. When Paul refers to Jesus as God in flesh, or when the gospel writers mention the same, it was to an audience who considered such unimaginable outside the fantastical myths of Roman and Greek deities.

In those stories of gods taking human form, they were never really human. It was ever a charade—a temporary means to communicate with mortal humanity. God Almighty, actually born in human flesh and living the natural course of human life on earth was a wholly different concept. This was no mere charade or costume assumed for a few moments. This was the Creator participating in the human experience from beginning to end. For that reason, it was the birth of Jesus that so significantly displayed Jesus’ humanity. In his birth, he was as one of us, subject to the limitations of human flesh and sharing our experience of life with all its difficulties and turmoil.

From Paul’s perspective, the human lineage of Jesus clearly went back to David. His birth and being named by Joseph were sufficient proof of that lineage from Jewish perspective. In terms of his divinity, however, Paul does not point to Jesus’ birth at all. Mary’s chastity, character, or purity with respect to sin has no place in Paul’s argument. The only point of interest here is Jesus’ resurrection. This is where the question of Jesus’ incarnation is most clearly portrayed and proven. The resurrection is what makes or breaks the question of Jesus being God. His birth was within the realm of human experience, but life beyond death placed him in the realm of divine experience.

It is from the experience of resurrection that Jesus’ life and death become good news for those who accept his offer of forgiveness, grace, and faith. It is likewise from the resurrection that Jesus becomes so much more than an itinerant teacher with an interesting message. Since the resurrection confirms Jesus to be God incarnate, it also confirms that Jesus’ words and example of living must be taken much more seriously than we are won’t to do.

Jesus was human, yet lived according to the will and character of God. Jesus was God, yet lived in the conditions of mortal humanity. His message was no idealism proclaimed as good theory. His words and actions were nothing less than the visible expression of Godly character within the realm of human experience. As God calls us to live, so God did also live in the person of Jesus Christ. The Sermon on the Mount was not just a sermon of ethereal bliss. It was the way Jesus lived. It was the way Jesus died. It is God’s command, not as one removed from our experience, but as one who participated in the human experience and decreed it the only appropriate manner for our living. It was this good news that took hold of Paul’s life. Will we allow it to claim ours as well?

**God lived on earth in Jesus. Allow the character of his example to guide your daily actions.**

***“Lord, help me see Jesus not as a hero, but as an example for living my life in your will.”***

## ***Sixth Day:***

***“Sir, I am your slave. Please let me stay here in place of Benjamin and let him return home with his brothers. How can I face my father if Benjamin isn’t with me? I couldn’t bear to see my father in such sorrow.” Genesis 44:33-34***

These do not sound like the words of a man who had sold his brother into slavery. They do not match the character of one who had gone along with the attempt to kill Joseph, or at least get rid of him so their father might quit comparing them to Joseph. Reuben had been the one to intervene in the plan to kill Joseph. Judah had just gone along with the others. We might have expected Reuben, the eldest brother, to have assumed responsibility for Benjamin’s safety, but it is Judah, instead, who steps up to the plate.

Judah’s words here mark a turning point. It is here that we see at last that a change has come over at least this one of the brothers since they last knowingly had contact with Joseph. Perhaps it was a sign like this that Joseph was seeking as he toyed with them and struggled against an honest desire for revenge over the brothers who had plotted his death and then sold him into slavery. This was, after all, their second trip into Egypt to buy grain. He had kept one of the brothers in prison for a year. He had framed them twice of theft. Still, he had not allowed them to know he was the brother they had plotted to kill and sold into slavery.

Rather than thinking about himself, Judah was now thinking of his father. There is no hint of repentance for their dealing with Joseph and Jacob in years past. There is no setting the record straight with regard to what had happened to the brother they reported as dead. We see, however, that over the years since the brothers had spoken, a change has come over Judah. He is now looking to how his actions affect others and his responsibility to his father as a higher priority than protecting his personal interests.

Joseph did not miss the change. He picked up on this signal that the conniving brothers have in at least some regard grown and changed since their separation. They are now willing to look after their father’s interests, rather than after their own advancement and personal concerns.

Selling Joseph into slavery had torn the family apart. It had damaged the relationship between the brothers and their father. It had altered the course of their lives. Joseph battled with his desire to treat them as they had treated him. He struggled against his desire for revenge and the desire to be reunited with his father and his brother Benjamin. It seems to have been Judah’s words and attitude that helped him make the decision to offer grace and forgiveness. It was Judah’s words that prompted him to clear the air and let them know he was still alive. It was at this point that healing for Joseph and his family could finally begin after so many years of heartache and broken relationships.

The broken trust between the brothers would still be an issue throughout their lives. At Jacob’s deathbed, they would still be hesitant to trust Joseph’s forgiveness after their treachery. Yet it is Joseph who becomes the victor as he offers forgiveness and begins to heal from the injury of their betrayal.

**Begin your process of healing from past hurts by forgiving. You are the one to gain by it.**

***“Lord, grant me the strength to forgive, even as you forgave those nailing you to the cross.”***

## ***Seventh Day:***

***“Lord, that’s true,’ the woman said, ‘but even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from their owner’s table.’ Jesus answered, ‘Dear woman, you really do have a lot of faith, and you will be given what you want.’ At that moment her daughter was healed.” Matthew 15:27-28***

Jesus was always in teacher mode, it seems. He had been talking with the disciples about ritual impurity, religious traditions about application of the law, and what makes people unclean before God. He had categorized that attitude the disciples took for granted as pointless, blind drivel. It is not the external things of life that separate us from God, but the inside motives and intentions of the heart. After giving the disciples the theory or doctrinal discussion, he went to the borders of Judaism to give them the practical application.

There is where he found her. She was not even part of the chosen people. She was a foreigner. She ate the wrong foods—the ones every Jew avoided on account of the Law. She was of the wrong lineage. She was not married to a circumcised male. She did not participate in the synagogue or temple rituals. By all accounts of purity and ritual, the Jews considered her unclean and about as far away from God as one could get. This is where the application of Jesus’ teaching made a difference. Here is where the disciples could see his words applied to a tangible reality.

It is not what goes into the mouth, but what comes out of the heart that makes one clean or unclean. That was the issue. Before them was a woman, wholly and completely unclean from every ritual standard. By the common doctrine of the day, her daughter was ill due to sin which incited the curse of demonic forces. She began to stalk Jesus.

How would a Jew respond? How should a Jew respond? Jesus allowed the question to hang thick in the air until the disciples were stirred and ready to have Jesus brush her aside as any religious Jew would have done. While Jesus remained silent with regard to her, the disciples tired of her and wanted to send her away. She was a nuisance. She was not part of the chosen nation. She was unclean. She was impure to stand before God. She was unfit for their attention. There were so many reasons to discard her along with her needs and cries for help. They asked Jesus to turn her away.

Jesus stopped. The woman came closer and pleaded her case. He turned to her and gave the standard reply that would be expected—the one the disciples were awaiting. “I was sent only to the people of Israel!” The disciples listened to her answer. She simply asked for help. Jesus gave her the summary Jewish perspective as to her unclean condition. She accepted the category of dog as a matter of course. She did not react with anger, malice, shame, or hurt. She simply pleaded her case based upon mercy and grace. I picture Jesus turning to the disciples and focusing their attention on her manner, her condition before God, her trust and confidence poured out freely.

“You really do have faith.” By all rights she was unclean, but in faith she was ready to meet God on the conditions of mercy, grace, and the trust of submission. It is on these lines that the true categories of purity before God reside. Are they evident in your life?

**Define who it is you would consider unclean. Seek ways to include them in God's grace.**

***“Lord, help me to look beyond my prejudices to see others with the eyes of your love.”***

## ***Eighth Day—Second Sunday of Easter:***

***“Then they started spreading rumors and saying, ‘We won’t be able to grow anything in that soil. And the people are like giants. In fact, we saw the Nephilim who are the ancestors of the Anakim. They were so big that we felt as small as grasshoppers.’” Numbers 13:32-33***

Fear was the spies’ motivation. Their message had little to do with the reality they had witnessed across the Jordan. They were focused on their own insecurities, rather than any confidence in God. Instead of bringing back a report as they had been tasked to do, they brought back and spread rumors of half-truths that grew more outlandish with the fanning of their fears.

Moses had sent them to spy the Promised Land and let the people know what to expect. It was a land that had once belonged in part to some of their ancestors. It was the land promised to Abraham and his descendants in ages past. It was the land that *Yahweh* had promised to give the Hebrews as he led them out of Egyptian bondage to Pharaoh.

This was the same generation who had left Egypt. This was the same people who had witnessed the deliverance of *Yahweh* on the banks of the Sea of Reeds, as well as in the plagues over the land of Egypt. *Yahweh* had delivered them from slavery to the most powerful nation of the world. *Yahweh* had granted them victory in battle over two more kings since leaving Egypt behind. God had fed them in the wilderness with manna. God had provided them with water where none was to be found. They had heard the voice of *Yahweh* on the mountain and seen his presence characterized in the pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night.

They were still afraid of the unknown. They were afraid of the untested. They were afraid of how the future would work out. They just were not sure they could trust God to take them into this land of promise and give them victory over the people who already lived there. Fortified cities seemed like too great an obstacle for a people that had only recently been a band of slaves in Egypt. Towns armed with chariots seemed like to great a threat to a people more accustomed to making bricks than wielding weapons.

Fear was their greatest enemy, we might say. On the other hand, maybe the real issue was the question of trust. Could they really trust *Yahweh* to continue leading them into an unknown land and providing for them against real enemies armed for battle? *Yahweh* had led them into the wilderness, given them food and water, and rescued them from Egypt’s armies. At the Sea of Reeds, however, they had not needed to fight. The water had engulfed their enemies. Across the Jordan, things would be different. Could they trust *Yahweh* in a new and strange situation, even if so far things had gone well?

To be honest, they had been afraid back in Egypt. They had been afraid at the Sea of Reeds. They had been afraid when water was scarce and food sources were not as they knew them. They had never learned to trust *Yahweh*. It was easier to keep the little they had in the wilderness than to try a new experience on the other side of the Jordan. They started rumors to make the people more afraid and allow them to hang on to the known wilderness rather than trust God into the unknown.

**Give your insecurities to God and trust God to take you through the uncertainties you face.**

***“Lord, help me live according to faith and trust, rather than from anxious fear.”***

## *Ninth Day:*

***“Test yourselves and find out if you really are true to your faith. If you pass the test, you will discover that Christ is living in you. But if Christ isn’t living in you, you have failed.” 2 Corinthians 13:5***

We think of the resurrection as something of long ago. We sing songs about it, re-enact events leading up to the resurrection, decorate crosses, plan festivities, and celebrate special services at sunrise to commemorate the importance of that first Easter Sunday, two millennia ago. From Paul’s words to the believers in Corinth, if that is all we do, we have completely missed the point of the resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is not simply an event of long, long, ago. It is not just about those happenings in the garden the women were reluctant to proclaim. It is not even just about the confirmation to the disciples that Jesus was indeed who he had claimed to be. While the resurrection was proof positive of Jesus’ divinity and the ultimate confirmation of his gospel, it was so much more. It had a greater purpose than confirming the past or being a point of celebration. The real point was that Jesus resurrected from the dead in order that he might live in and through us.

As long as Jesus was living in a human body, his presence was limited to those same limitations to which we are bound. His voice was limited to the range of hearing. His touch was limited to the same geographical constraints that hamper us. His attention was limited to those who could gather around him at any one moment in time. With the resurrection, all that has changed. Jesus can be more present with us than during the days of his corporeal ministry. He can be, but that presence is conditional. It is not a given.

The believers in Corinth were divided on so many issues. They were concerned over the ecstatic gifts of God, over internal personality cults, on social and economic advancement, over status—they were struggling to understand and apply the gospel as Jesus and Paul intended. Paul’s clamor here was for them to review their own lives. This was no formality or trivial matter. He was concerned that among all the different emphases hampering the fellowship among the believers in Corinth was a deeper problem—they may not have actually turned their lives over to Christ Jesus at all.

James Engel (<http://www.lwcf.org.uk/evangelism.pdf>) devised a scale of evangelism, whereby he tried to show that people often hear the gospel and display interest. At this point, the church may baptize them, though they have not made a commitment to Christ Jesus. They may be demonstrating interest in hearing more of the gospel. It is this issue to which Paul is essentially pointing. It is one thing to associate with the gospel or a church. It is another to actually commit our lives to Christ Jesus and allow the risen Lord full access to our lives.

Christ is indeed risen! He is risen not simply from the dead. He is also risen to live with and within all those who would accept him as Lord and Savior. He is risen to live within and through our lives, so to continue his ministry in today’s world. If Christ is not living in and through our lives, for all practical purposes, he is still lying entombed within our hearts. How long will we keep the resurrection at bay and not allow Jesus to minister through our words and actions?

**Determine to allow Christ to rise in your life through your words and deeds.**

***“Lord, help me honor your resurrection by granting you room to live in and through me.”***

## ***Tenth Day:***

***“You must be very careful not to forget the things you have seen God do for you. Keep reminding yourselves, and tell your children and grandchildren as well. Do you remember the day you stood in Yahweh's presence at Mount Sinai? Yahweh said, ‘Moses, bring the people of Israel here. I want to speak to them so they will obey me as long as they live, and so they will teach their children to obey me, too.’” Deuteronomy 4:9-10***

We often forget that storytelling is a Biblical mandate. We get caught up in good things like Bible study and rehearsing the canonized stories of faith. We forget that there is a whole other sequence of faith stories. They are our own stories. They are the stories of how God has dealt with us and brought us through our own experiences of redemption from Egyptian bondages.

Moses commanded the Hebrews in the desert to rehearse their stories of God's intervention in their lives. They were to talk with their children of how *Yahweh* had been present in their lives from bondage in Egyptian captivity to the transit through the Sea of Reeds, providing manna in the wilderness, water from the rocks of an arid land, and standing before the presence of *Yahweh* on the holy mountain of God. This was the Bible they were writing—that God was writing in the experience of their lives. It was a personal message of personal redemption and relationship with *Yahweh*, God of Israel.

Generations after were to rehearse the stories as well. As the Jews still celebrate redemption from Egyptian bondage in their Passover Seder celebrations, so we likewise rehearse what God has done for us at Calvary. This is the focus of our Holy Week and Easter celebrations. God has come to earth to live as one of us, to die at our hands, that he might offer redemption, forgiveness, grace, mercy, and love. It is because of those events two thousand years ago that we have new life in Christ.

That misses the point of Moses' words, however. As important as were the events surrounding Calvary, there is another story we are supposed to tell. It is not the story of Jesus Christ on the cross and leaving the empty tomb. It is not the story of leaving a life of bondage in Egypt through the muddy Sea of Reeds. It is the story of God's presence and action in our lives today.

It is the story of God providing for me and my new wife during lean years as seminary students. It is the story of God supplying medical care for delivering a healthy child during a birth wrapped in trauma. It is the story of Christ using a two-year-old boy to open doors of ministry with neighbors. It is the story of a gift of \$5000 awaiting me on return from discussing a need for four basic libraries for the seminary extension program I coordinated—a need that could be fulfilled with \$5000. It is the story of a poor Brazilian church depending upon God rather than gifts from rich Americans to rebuild a crumbling sanctuary. It is the story of God providing help through Christian and non-Christian friends when we were forced to make an international move in a span of 16 days. It is the story of the presence of Christ Jesus touching my life through others and flowing through me to touch lives around me.

In telling our own stories of God, we are reminded that faith is just stories of long ago, but of a risen Lord who is alive and well today. What are the stories you should be telling?

**Write down or tell someone else a story of God's presence in your life.**

***“Lord, remind me of your presence and action that I might call others to see you present still.”***

## ***Eleventh Day:***

***“In fact, all creation is eagerly awaiting for God to show who his children are. Meanwhile, creation is confused, but not because it wants to be confused. God made it this way in the hope that creation would be set free from decay and would share in the glorious freedom of his children. We know that all creation is still groaning and is in pain, like a woman about to give birth.” Romans 8:19-22***

Paul was talking about redemption, not environmentalism. Paul was discussing issues of sin, forgiveness, and reconciliation with God. Paul was talking about the lengths to which God has gone to bring us into relationship with God and one another. He was talking about the effects of sin on our lives and relationships. He understood as well, that sin impacts the very world in which we live.

This was not a radical concept in Paul’s day. The nations all around understood that sin was a factor in the coming of rain or the beginning of a famine. They were attuned to the idea that sin could bring about a plague or a destructive storm. They understood that one must appease the gods of a given land in order for harvest time to come with a bounty. They understood that life was a cohesive whole, in which sin played a part in what we today call the natural world.

For Paul, there was no distinction between the spiritual and the secular. That is a modern concept that we have invented. It is an American invention, this distinction between the secular and the holy, the religious and the profane. In earlier days, it was just considered life. There was an understanding that life was a balance in which sin and one’s relationship with the divine played an important role. We have somehow, lost that understanding in our American experiment.

In our secular society, today is Earth Day. We are called to consider the needs of the physical world in which we live—the environment with its multi-faceted forms of life and balance of structures that allow for life to continue. For some in the church, this is too secular a notion. For Paul, it is part of the demands of faith to heed how our sinfulness and rejection of God impacts not only our individual eternity, but life on earth in its myriad forms.

We might point today to the greed which drove Portuguese explorers to level the vast majority of the Brazilian rainforests five hundred years ago. We can see how greed destroys and reshapes the world around us. We might also look to the arrogance of the East India Company of ages gone by who enslaved a people in India into the production of poppy at the expense of fields once devoted to the food supply of a nation. We might look to oceanic overfishing which disturbs the balance of life, creating plagues of jellyfish where they were once controlled by the fish we now remove from the waters. We might look at our economic self-interests that continue to ignore the footprint we leave behind on God’s creation.

All of creation awaits redemption. All life is in need of the restoration of God’s purposes and design for life. Our own individual lives need redemption and restoration. The physical world around us needs restoration, as well—the kind that only we humans as stewards of God’s world can support as we allow God to redeem the world through our actions of individual redemption and response.

**Define how your habits should bend in response to the effects of sin on God’s creation.**

***“Lord, help me to hear the groans of your creation and participate in your goal of redemption.”***

## ***Twelfth Day:***

***“Don’t forget that you were once slaves in Egypt and that it was Yahweh who set you free. ... When you become successful, don’t say, ‘I’m rich and I’ve earned it all myself.’ Instead, remember that Yahweh your God gives you the strength to make a living. That’s how he keeps the promise he made to your ancestors.” Deuteronomy 8:14, 17-18***

How could anyone forget they had once been a slave? It might seem a little disingenuous to think that someone could forget something of that nature. Moses’ words, however, were targeted to a new generation. Those who had actually been slaves were dying out, and the younger generation with only vague memories of slavery was Moses’ audience. The next generation only had stories of their grandparents’ day. Moses himself was nearing death. He was talking to the next generation and those who would follow. He was pointing to the years ahead when the Egyptian experience was a vague memory of ancestor who lived no more.

“When you become successful,” he said, “don’t forget that you owe the very opportunity to the fact of God’s deliverance of your ancestors.” The rights and privileges of a freed generation exist in large part due to what those before have built. Our success, as some have stated, is the result of standing on the shoulders of giants. Moses put it differently. Our success is due to what God has done for us.

It may not be easy to forget we were once slaves. It is very easy, however, to swallow the mantra of our society that tells us that success is due to one’s own initiative and drive. We are the masters of our own fate, we are told. We live in the land of opportunity for those who will mold their lives after their desires for advancement, wealth, and achievement. We fail to state the obvious that not all who work hard, study hard, and apply themselves will be able to define their lives according to their dreams of success. Our place in life is not completely in our hands. Some rise to the top by accidents of chance or birth. Others fail by the same tokens. Regardless, we hear and recite the mantra again as if stating it once more will make it true.

Moses would remind us that even in our efforts to get ahead, to become rich, to prosper, to be free of debt and financial need, we are dependant on more than our own strength, determination, and the ability to succeed. We are dependant upon the very life and breath God has granted. We are dependant upon the very context into which God has allowed us to be born.

At the point of wealth, achievement, and prominence is where we are most tempted to believe we have achieved due to our own designs, strength, and initiative. Here, however, is where we are to be held under the greatest accountability to God’s action in enabling our success. We are to recognize that all of life is a trust of stewardship and responsibility toward God who has brought us to this place in life and time.

All we have is not what we have earned. It is not what we have accomplished on our own effort. It is what God has enabled us to receive. Should we forget the trust—forget that we were once slaves—we become slaves once again, this time to the delusions of our pride and self-importance.

**Take stock of where God has placed you and your dependence upon God’s provision.**

***“Lord, remind me that all I have and am is yours. Use my all as a faithful steward.”***

## ***Thirteenth Day:***

***“We went there [Jerusalem] because of those who pretended to be followers and had sneaked in among us as spies. They had come to take away the freedom that Christ Jesus had given us, and they were trying to make us their slaves.” Galatians 2:4-5***

Paul had ongoing conflict with the day’s legalists. The Galatian letter is mostly devoted to legalism in the early church. Many wanted to accept Jesus Christ, yet force faith within the mold of Jewish legalistic tradition. They seemed to miss that Jesus had struggled against the very tradition and legalism to which they so desperately clung. They ignored Jesus' preaching about serving God in spirit and truth, about religious defilement being a result of heart attitudes, not food and external issues.

The legalists were worried with questions of dietary laws, questions of ritual purity, strict observation of the Sabbath, and the circumcision of all males. These questions clouded over issues of faith, grace, and Jesus' summary of God's commandment as the law of love for God and one's neighbor. They were not actually so concerned with the law, as they were with their traditions about the law.

In striving after legalistic concerns, they tripped over Jesus' concern with grace, mercy, and love. Focusing attention on lists of do's and don'ts, they missed the freedom inherent in the gospel. This was not a freedom resulting in immorality and the abolition of limits. It was rather the freedom to enjoy life as God intended it to be lived. It was the freedom to live in fellowship with one another and with God. The Law became a guide pointing the direction of life, not a burden to which life was to be reduced.

Paul did not simply decry legalism within the church. He recognized that it did not belong to the gospel at all. Rather than casting them as weak Christians, misguided believers, or as those who simply needed further instruction in the gospel of Christ, he considered them as non-believers who had inserted themselves within the church but not into the gospel. They were thieves among the sheep. They were there to enslave those whom Christ Jesus had died to set free. Whether in innocence or by design, the focus of their efforts was to preach not simply something other than Christ, but contrary to Christ Jesus.

Jesus died to free us from legalism. Jesus died to free us from the bonds of sin and slavery to a rules-minded lifestyle. We are well aware of how legalism works against the intent of our own laws in a justice system focused on reading the letter of our legal code. We are accustomed to contracts which can be manipulated by skillful lawyers to trap the unsuspecting. We are used to technicalities being used to convict or acquit those brought to trial for some or another crime. It is in this respect that legalism also fails to measure up to the will and standards of God in Christ Jesus.

Jesus came not to fulfill the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law. He came to live an example of life in fellowship with God and our fellow human beings. He lived out worship of God alone. He gave example of honoring others, of loving others, of enacting justice for those with needs they could not fulfill. He showed how we are free to love God and allow God's love to flow through us to those around us. Anything less is neither the gospel Jesus preached, nor the way Jesus lived.

**Check to see where legalism encroaches on grace in your life. Give that over to Christ Jesus.**

***“Lord, grant me the maturity to find freedom in Christ that will allow me to love those you love.”***

## *Fourteenth Day:*

***“The next day, God stopped sending the Israelites manna to eat each morning, and they started eating food grown in the land of Canaan. They ate roasted grain and thin bread made of the barley they gathered from nearby fields.” Joshua 5:11-12***

God’s provision does not often come in the manner we expect. The Hebrews were accustomed to manna coming as the morning dew, but now it came no more. Previously, they had complained that manna was the only thing to eat. Doubtless, many complained now that the manna was gone. It is the problem of human nature. We desperately desire security in the things we know. We are often loath to try new ideas, experiences, food, and traditions, because we find safety in the forms of life that have sustained us across the years—especially those which call to mind the nostalgic memories of childhood.

Manna, however, was not the focus of God’s plan. Manna was a provisional step to care for them until they entered the Promised Land. Now as the people crossed over the Jordan, God moved them on to another step of provision. Now it was time to provide through the richness of the land promised to Abraham. It was still *Yahweh’s* provision—planned for within the very fabric of creation.

Collecting manna had been work. Bending over to harvest the tiny bits of food to be pound, grind, or cook required effort. So God’s provision was not without responsibility on the part of a people under God’s care. The new means of provision would also require effort on behalf of the people. They would harvest grain. They would process the produce; they would sow; they would weed; and they would reap all kinds of produce in the land. None of this, however, would be theirs without the provision of *Yahweh* who had now led them into the land of promise.

We can be sure there were many complaining that God had stopped providing for their needs. Now they were on their own. They had been cut off with no hope of support or plan for provision. Yet provision was already all around them. They had but to step out of their routines to see the action of *Yahweh* going before them to prepare for their entrance into the Promised Land.

At issue was not really the question of provision. At issue was the question of trust. Would they trust *Yahweh* to meet their needs in this new context of life? Would they look around to seek the new possibilities the fulfillment of the promise offered? There were fields with ripening grain. There were trees bearing olives and figs. There were vineyard and places to plant them. There was a land made fertile in the very structure of God’s creation—a land to sustain life and allow the people to recognize the hand of their Creator in fashioning a world with their needs in mind.

In times of economic crisis, we also may be tempted to look at how life used to be. We are wont to hang onto the means and patterns of the past. Yet even when those structures are abolished, God is not at wit’s end as to providing for our needs. Where there was once manna, perhaps there are fields of barley. Both the one and the other have their origin in the same Creator who fashioned a world with our needs in mind. Are we ready to follow God into the new realm of provision?

**Set down what God would have you release in order to receive provision for the days ahead.**

***“Lord, open my eyes to see the action of your providing, instead of the routines on which I tend to focus my attention.”***

## ***Fifteenth Day—Third Sunday of Easter:***

***“But the child who was born in the natural way made trouble for the child who was born because of the Spirit. The same thing is happening today. The Scriptures say, ‘Get rid of the slave woman and her son! He won't be given anything. The son of the free woman will receive everything.’ My friends, we are children of the free woman and not of the son.” Galatians 5:29-31***

The Jews prided themselves on being Abraham's descendants through Sarah. They were of the line of the son of the promise to Abraham. They were the legitimate heirs to the promise. That other son, though firstborn, was deemed unfit, unacceptable, and of lesser status and importance than their own ancestor. Reading the stories of Isaac, we might wonder what all the fuss was about. After all, the only really special thing about him was that he was Abraham's son through Sarah.

He failed the test of character. He failed the test of fatherhood. He failed the test of bringing up his own sons to honor, respect, and worship *Yahweh*, God of his own father. No, there was little to commend Isaac as much in the way of a patriarch. He was a conduit to be surpassed or overcome in succeeding generations of the family.

Then again, what the Jews were concerned about was not really Abrahams' sons or grandsons. They were concerned about their own importance in the larger plan of *Yahweh*. They were concerned with standing apart from the other nations in deserving God's attention. They were concerned with being better, superior, chosen, purer, and more worthy than others of God's blessing and attention. What they were after was status before God and backing up an arrogance of attitude before others. In such a focus, they missed the point of being God's people, becoming slaves to their categories of distinction, instead of free to serve *Yahweh* and live in the blessings of *Yahweh's* provision.

It wasn't just the Jews outside the realm of the gospel. There was also a problem within the life of the believing communities. Those old modes of self-righteousness through the observance of tradition, following rituals, and securing a pedigree did not reflect the logic of the argument that purported to claim their very superiority. Sure, the child of the free woman had higher status than the child of a slave girl. Yet struggling over the issues of pushing their superiority through a code of legalistic action just enslaved them to the designs of legalism. It did not reflect the freedom to enjoy the blessings of God's promise to the one they claimed as father.

As Judaism had been transformed into a system of legalistic ritual, the Jews had given up their freedom to love, honor, and worship God. They had degenerated into a people with a shell of claiming to know God, yet were living far removed from the attitudes of Abraham's faith. They no longer trusted God. They trusted their traditions about God. They trusted their patterns of ritual and routine. They were so focused on these that when God arrived in flesh and blood they could only see that he did not bow to their rules and regulations. Confronted with the grace of God that ignored the boundaries of their legalism, they yelled “Crucify!”

**Determine where you have allowed slavery to something other than grace to interfere with your relationship with God. Release that in order to accept the freedom of Christ.**

***“Lord, grant me the courage to step outside my box of security to live according to the freedom of grace into which you have called me.”***

## ***Sixteenth Day:***

***“After a while the people of Joshua’s generation died, and the next generation did not know Yahweh or any of the things he had done for Israel. Yahweh had brought their ancestors out of Egypt, and they had worshiped him. But now the Israelites stopped worshiping Yahweh and worshiped the idols of Ba’al and Astarte, as well as the idols of other gods from nearby nations. Yahweh was so angry...” Judges 2:10-13***

This was a recurring theme among the Hebrews. A generation would be faithful under the lead of a prophet. The next generation seemed to forget *Yahweh* altogether. Even within Moses' generation, worship of *Yahweh* was at best tenuous. Joshua fought to keep the people on track of following *Yahweh*, but in his final speech before death, he still considered them an idolatrous nation. *Yahweh* would lead them in victory over their enemies, free them from oppression, and provide for their needs, only to have the people forget all about *Yahweh*. They would be distracted by the closest idol and revert back to idolatry and fertility cults.

*Yahweh's* chosen people just were not that special in so many ways. At heart they were idolatrous and invested in their personal issues. They were not focused on worshiping God. *Yahweh* had brought them out of Egypt, but it would seem that since the days of Abraham, it was idolatry that had reigned among them rather than serving *Yahweh*. They looked around at the worship of the nations and modeled their lives after them, seemingly oblivious to the will of *Yahweh*.

The generation after Joshua had heard accounts of God leading them into Canaan, but the stories had not become part of their own experience. They were stories about some other generation, some other group of people, some other experience far removed from the issues on their radar. They were more concerned with learning from the peoples in their midst than serving *Yahweh* in faithfulness.

In one sense, worshiping idols was related to the science of the day. The people believed that there were certain ritual practices that should be observed in order for the gods to cause seeds to sprout, crops to grow, and rain to fall. Participation in fertility cults was part of the agricultural technology of the day—a technology they were learning from the Canaanites. As the pilgrims of New England learned to bury fish with their seed crops from the Native Americans, the Hebrews learned agriculture from their neighbors. They learned to offer sacrifices to Ba'al and participate in the fertility rites of the nations as they took to agriculture for the first time.

They brushed aside the command to have no idols in their lives. They ignored *Yahweh's* insistence on being the only God worthy of their worship. They figured they would do better learning to live in Canaan from the Canaanites than from the priests at *Yahweh's* tabernacle. The stories of days gone by were fine, but they were living a new reality. They were concerned to make it in their new reality according to the pattern established all around them. It was the way things were done in Canaan. It was the way they assumed life must go forward. How often do we likewise fail to learn from God and look to the ways of an unrighteous world which surrounds us?

**Look back over what God has done in your life and in the lives of believers who have shaped your faith. Determine where your plans and actions flow from God's design or other influences.**

***“Lord, help me to fix my faith and direction on you, instead of following to a worldly society.”***

## ***Seventeenth Day:***

***“We must each carry our own load. Share every good thing you have with anyone who teaches you what God has said. You cannot fool God, so don’t make a fool of yourself! You will harvest what you plant. If you follow your selfish desires, you will harvest destruction, but if you follow the Spirit, you will harvest eternal life.” Galatians 6:5-8***

Paul seems to forget the common wisdom that 20 percent of the people do 80 percent of the work. This breakdown is not a new phenomenon. It is all too common for only a small portion of a church body to do the work of the church. It is normally that very same number who financially supports the church budget, ministry expenses, and missions. Maybe Paul was not privileged with the information we have on how groups of people function. Perhaps the realities of persecution weeded out those who were unwilling to contribute to faith with their time, talents, and material resources. More likely, the same experience of depending on a handful was a First Century reality, just as it is in our own time.

It is interesting to note that those who contribute time and energy to the church are also those most likely to contribute financially. Our financial resources follow the investments we make with our time and effort. Mission agencies like hosting short-term volunteers, for those who invest their time in a mission effort return home to increase the investment of their financial resources, as well. In talking of participation in the mission of Christ Jesus, however, Paul speaks of a much greater contribution and reward.

Paul boils the issue down to a simple equation. We have a choice to make on how we will invest our lives. We can invest in selfish issues, or we can invest in God. The decision we make in terms of where we choose to invest our time, energy, talents, and material resources will likewise determine the quality of the return we will receive on our investments. What kind of return are we seeking?

When we are the minority paying 80 percent of the bills, we are likely to question the fairness of the proposition. We are likely to be upset that the majority are not picking up their fair share of the load. On the other hand, Paul says that in reality, the minority is not overburdened. It is the 80 percent who are missing out on God’s blessings as a result of their burden of their selfish direction. Their short-sighted selfish actions and attitudes rob them of the blessings God has in store. They are charting a course of destruction rather than blessing.

It is like the world of financial investments. We are told there are simple steps to insure long term yields. Make consistent investments over time. Diversify holdings. Invest for the long term. It is when we ignore these simple steps that we tend not to meet our financial goals. It is when greed takes over and places our focus on the short terms that we miss the mark.

So it is with our investments in eternity. Spiritual growth and eternal rewards demand consistency. It is necessary to keep sight of the goal. The goal in Paul’s view is service to God that results in fellowship with the Almighty, both here and forevermore.

**What does the investment of your time and resources say about the direction of your life? Take action to focus your investment on goals of eternal consequence.**

***“Lord, help me to look upon investing in your mission from a perspective of eternity.”***

## *Eighteenth Day:*

***“Manoah said, ‘Tell us your name so we can honor you after our son is born.’ ‘No,’ the angel replied. ‘You don’t need to know my name. And if you did, you couldn’t understand it.’” Judges 13:17-18***

Manoah had plenty of issues to work through. Why God chose to send Samson as this man’s son is not very apparent. First of all, Manoah refused to heed the message conveyed to his wife. He did pray to *Yahweh*, regarding the message, but apparently in an attitude which seemed to disregard his wife as capable of transmitting the message she had been given.

Manoah was put out that the angel of *Yahweh* had not met with him. He did not like that the angel had appeared and spoken directly with his wife. As husband, his was the important role. He should have been addressed as Abraham had long before been told of Sarah’s impending pregnancy. Instead, he had been overlooked and ignored. Speaking to his wife had been enough for the angel, but Manoah’s sense of self-importance and protocol was injured by the action of the *Yahweh*’s messenger.

When he could not make the angel follow his preconceived procedures, he asked the angel to tell him his name. The petition was ostensibly to enable Manoah to honor the messenger of *Yahweh*, but there was much more to the request than that. Knowing one’s name was understood as having power over the one named. As man had been given authority to name the animals in the Garden of Eden, he had been granted authority over the animal world. So Manoah now desired some sort of leverage over this messenger of *Yahweh* who would not bow to the rules of propriety.

Manoah did not know what he was asking. His world of understanding was too limited for him to fully recognize the implications of his request. Questions of tradition, culture, status, class, and ranking people in order of importance had too much control over his thoughts and actions. Without recognizing it, he was trying to force God into a box of his comfort. He wanted God to be more controlled—to follow the rules by which he ordered his world. He asked for the angel’s name, not recognizing he could never control God or God’s dealings with humanity. He would not even have been able to understand the name of the messenger, nor would it have mattered.

The importance of the visit by *Yahweh*’s messenger was not to raise Manoah’s importance. It was not really to do with Manoah, at all. The importance of the meeting was to communicate with his wife that God was about to do something special with and through her. She had now received God’s instructions more than once. The message was the important issue. Manoah’s attention should have been focused on what God was planning to do. All he could focus on, however, was himself and his own issues and feelings of inadequacy. God was intervening in his life, but what he really wanted was control, a sense of power, and a greater degree of self-importance.

He felt threatened and robbed of position when God spoke to his wife. He felt injured, when there had been no change in his own life. God had just not chosen to confirm his sense of self-importance. In his plea for prestige, he missed rejoicing in God’s attention to his family. He was too blind to see it.

**Determine where you expect God to follow your notions and submit them to Christ as Lord.**

***“Lord, help me to worry less with my sense of self and more with your plans and mission.”***

## ***Nineteenth Day:***

***“God raised us from death to life with Christ Jesus, and he has given us a place beside Christ in heaven. God did this so that in the future world he could show how truly good and kind he is to us because of what Christ Jesus has done. You were saved by faith in God, who treats us much better than we deserve. This is God’s gift to you, and not anything you have done on your own.” Ephesians 2:6-8***

Salvation has nothing to do with how good and important we are. It is all about how gracious, good, kind, and generous God is. Salvation concerns how God became an offering in Christ Jesus to reconcile us with God. It has nothing to do with our deserving. It has nothing to do with being chosen above others. In reality, it has very little, if anything, to do with us. It is about God.

The Jews had trouble with this concept. They were, after all, the chosen people. They were better than those worthless, idolatrous Gentile nations. They were clean and pure from observing all the dictates of the Mosaic Law, as well as being descendants of Abraham. They had a very high idea of themselves and struggled with this gospel of grace and faith which dashed aside all their self-importance. They preferred the idea of earning a place at the Messianic table. Earning a place was, after all, a question about status, standing, and the measure of the righteousness they had earned for being faithful to God. If salvation were in actuality a question of grace, their self-importance would be brushed aside like the filthy rags of human righteousness spoken of by Isaiah.

They did not like the idea of grace. Grace made their efforts as earning God’s favor worthless. Grace made their achievements of no account. Grace meant that they were no better than the filthy scum of society that drunkenly paraded around the square asking for handouts. They were respectable. They had a place in society. They were a chosen people, a people of honor, a people who commanded respect for their earnest zeal in following the letter of the Mosaic Law and the traditions of their elders. They were not about to give up on all that. It would mean breaking with their heritage, traditions, and casting doubt on their ancestors who had not understood grace.

There is more to the story here, however, than the pride of the Jews. Paul’s story is that though we may have problems with accepting grace due to our pride, the amazing story in Christ Jesus is God’s love and acceptance of all. Beyond the fact of God’s love and grace, the point of being offered grace and reconciliation is that we might have a live alongside Jesus Christ in eternity with God.

The messianic banquet the Jews anticipated is not Paul’s focus. It was a symbol, but its focus was better understood as our interaction and fellowship with God in Christ Jesus. At the eternal banquet hall of heaven, it is our relationship with God in Christ which matters. Communion and fellowship with the Almighty define the very essence of heaven and the purpose of the gospel of grace. Too long have we focused on salvation and heaven as entering a retirement community. It is high time to invest in our relationship with God. That is, after all, the point of salvation and grace. It is no longer about our standing, status, or prestige, but about fellowship with the Almighty that will last for eternity under God’s grace.

**Consider how you are fellowshiping with God and what that fellowship should look like.**

***“Lord, help me to focus on the purpose of your grace and less on questions of self-worth.”***

## *Twentieth Day:*

***“Delilah shouted, ‘Samson, the Philistines are attacking!’ Samson woke up and thought, ‘I’ll break loose and escape, just as I always do.’ He did not realize that Yahweh had stopped helping him.” Judges 16:20***

How often we take God for granted. We like to picture God in the image of an indulgent grandfather. We view God as laughing at our antics, encouraging our freedom to express ourselves unreservedly, and promoting little thought to consequences or responsible actions. God is just so loving we need not take a thought for supposed demands on our time, resources, or character. We assume we can just cruise along through life, be better than those who wind up in prison, and expect God to be at our beck and call, even though most of the time we live as though there were no God.

Samson was accustomed to handling God like a puppet on a string. He did not think much of depending upon God. He just accepted *Yahweh* as present with no strings attached. He could ignore God's command for the people not to marry among the surrounding nations. He could brush aside issues of responsibility for his actions and *Yahweh's* demand for Israel to live according to prescribed law, not the customs and rules of their neighbors. Samson was part of the chosen people. He lived under the banner of the promise to Abraham. He had phenomenal strength at his disposal because of *Yahweh's* gift. He was so used to it, he ignored any responsibility toward God for the gift in his care. After all, he had come to consider it his, not the special intervention of *Yahweh*.

Samson allowed his lust for Delilah to cloud his thoughts and actions. His decisions were not those of one dedicated to God. They were those of a man accustomed to getting his way. He ignored questions of dependence upon *Yahweh*. Overlooking the conditions of his strength—respect for *Yahweh* and honoring the regulations placed upon his life—he likewise ignored God in the pursuit of his own objectives. God had always been there, and Samson just took it for granted.

The game with Delilah was one he had played before. He had given her various scenarios as to how he might be trapped beyond the limits of his strength. It had never really occurred to him that by breaking the parameters established for his life he might actually lose the strength *Yahweh* had granted him. It was, after all, just a game he had been playing with Delilah. Toying with her, he had also been proving himself and allowing himself to believe in her faithfulness to him. He forgot about faithfulness to *Yahweh*, however. The passions of the moment overcame the tenuous faithfulness and dedication he had toward *Yahweh*, God of Israel.

In Delilah's arms, he was trying to use the gift of *Yahweh* to serve his own interests, instead of the purpose for which God had gifted him with immense power. Instead of helping release his people from the oppression of the Philistines, he was abusing God's gift for his personal aims. Responsibility for God's gifting was lost. Dependence upon God was overlooked. He forgot that he was endowed for a purpose higher than his own passions. Samson had lost focus, if he had ever really had a good focus on God's purposes. Are our lives any more attuned to God's purposes than Samson in Delilah's arms?

**Assess your track record in following the mission and plan of God for your life. Determine not to take God's gifts and presence for granted.**

***“Lord, remind me to live for your purposes instead of settling for my own lesser ones.”***

## ***Twenty-First Day:***

***“You were told that your foolish desires will destroy you and that you must give up your old way of life with all its bad habits. Let the Spirit change your way of thinking and make you into a new person. You were created to be like God, and so you must please him and be truly holy.” Ephesians 4:22-24***

Knowing and doing are very different things. In education, we speak of teaching as necessarily changing the way one acts. If there is no transformation of action, there is no real understanding. Without the application of knowledge to life, it is only information that may be recalled, but has not yet been accepted and integrated into life. In theology, that is often where we stand, as well.

We have plenty of information about God, about the Bible, about the gospel of Jesus Christ, about the pattern for our lives as set forth in the Sermon on the Mount, in the life example of Jesus, in the lives of Paul, Peter, and other Biblical heroes of faith. Making a transition from knowledge about God to the experience of God’s active presence in our lives, however, is a far different thing.

The believers Paul addressed already had a lot of knowledge. They knew the kinds of things they were supposed to be doing. They could recite the kinds of actions, habits, and attitudes they should have as believers in Christ Jesus. They had listened to Paul preach. They had watched Paul live among them for a period of some three years. They had seen his example of living with Christ and watching Christ Jesus live through him. Their heads were full of information, but at issue was the character of their lives in application of what they could claim to know.

This was the issue that gave Paul concern. They knew what to do. They knew what to leave off doing. They knew how the gospel should impact their lives. They were lagging, however, in putting all that knowledge into practice.

Whether or not we accept the premise of Global Warming as a product of human action, we know that landfills are filling up due to our consumption of plastics. We know that a failure to recycle paper results in more trees being cut down. We know that habitat for many species of plants and animals are being destroyed, the seas are being polluted, and Americans waste as much as most of the world consumes. Having the will to address the issue, however, is an entirely other matter.

The same is true for our lives of faith. We can waste our knowledge of God and the demands of the gospel. We can pay lip-service to living for Christ Jesus. We can go so far as to memorize the Beatitudes, Lord’s Prayer, and Psalm 23. Until we begin living by those passages, however, we have not really begun the journey of the faith to which we claim to cling.

We delude ourselves into thinking that claiming the name of Jesus, praying the sinner’s prayer, going to church, and singing a few hymns is all that is needed to assure us of a place in heaven. We hide the fact that faith is so much more than a destination in eternity. It is a life with Christ Jesus today that will endure forever. Isn’t it high time to worry about becoming like the one we claim as Lord? That is the purpose of accepting Jesus as Lord—to allow His will and identity to become reality in our lives.

**Set your habits up for scrutiny under the will of Christ and keep what flows from God.**

***“Lord, help me focus not on knowledge, but on the application of your gospel to my life.”***

## ***Twenty-Second Day—Fourth Sunday of Easter:***

***“Then she told them, ‘Don’t call me Naomi any longer! Call me Mara, because God has made my life bitter. I had everything when I left, but Yahweh has brought me back with nothing. How can you still call me Naomi, when God has turned against me and made my life so hard?’” Ruth 1:20-21***

Life looked bleak for Naomi. There was seemingly no hope left for her. She had no husband to care for her and protect her rights. She had no sons to take his place. They had been her security in society. As a landless, childless widow, she had little opportunity. Per custom and law, her deceased husband's closest male relative should have accepted her as a wife to provide her with children, yet as her three sons had married before their deaths, she was likely too old to bear more children. All she had enjoyed in the past was lost, save for the daughter-in-law who had chosen to stick with her.

It was strange that Ruth chose to follow Naomi back to Israel. There was seemingly little it would do for either of them. Naomi could by no means provide for Ruth. As a widow and foreigner, Ruth was unlikely to find a new husband in Israel. She had better chances among her own people to find a new husband and a new beginning on life.

Things did not look like they would improve any time soon. There was not much thought they could get much worse, either. There was just no light to be seen at the end of the tunnel. For all practical purposes, it seemed *Yahweh* had forsaken Naomi, casting her out on her own as though in punishment for some crime. While it was her husband and sons who had died, it was Naomi who suffered in the balance. Gone were her security, her support, and her means of survival in a world that did not give women much value or respect. Her options were limited both by her gender and her status as a widow, as well as by her age.

Her loss was what she could best see. It was easy to look at the past and fall into fear, despair, and doubt. It was depressing to look toward such a bleak future that seemed to stare back at her. Hope may be the last to die, as the saying goes, but from her standpoint, hope was already gone. For her, it was an overwhelming sense of loss which dampened any sense of possibility and restoration.

She could not see beyond the disaster of life that enshrouded her. Grief was coupled by a sense of hopeless abandonment by God. After all, it was God who had allowed her husband and sons to be taken away from her. It was God who had allowed her to return empty-handed to Israel with no hope of a new tomorrow, a new beginning.

Unlike Naomi, we can see beyond the bitterness she claimed as her own. We can look to the end of the story and see that *Yahweh* was not done with Naomi, or with Ruth. Nothing was hopeless and helpless in the situation. Hopelessness was simply a product of her despair and depression. *Yahweh* had new opportunities and options in store, as unlikely as they seemed to Naomi. Her future was still bright and pleasant as her name stated, even if she failed to see it. Her grief was still just as real, but there was hope in God, even if she could not see what was in store.

**Turn your attention from your doubts and problems to reflect instead on God's faithfulness.**

***“Lord, help me look to you as the light at the end of the tunnel, rather than what I can see.”***

## ***Twenty-Third Day:***

***“Slaves, you must obey your earthly masters. Show them great respect and be as loyal to them as you are to Christ. Try to please them at all times, and not just when you think they are watching. You are slaves of Christ, so with your whole heart you must do what God wants you to do. Gladly serve your masters, as though they were the Lord himself, and not simply people.” Ephesians 6:5-7***

Slavery in New Testament times was somewhat different than slavery as we picture it. Slaves had more rights and opportunities than in recent history. They were normally slaves for a specific period of time, more along the lines of indentured servants than slaves. They could gain property and earn an income. They could marry. They could free themselves. Slavery was then a matter of economics without the overtones of racism. Even so, slaves were still slaves. They were required to do their master's bidding under threat of physical punishment. They were property, even if for a limited time.

Slavery was no life of ease. It was not a station to prize or seek. Many did turn to slavery to pay off debts, but only as a last resort akin to bankruptcy. People could be forced to sell their children into slavery in repayment of a debt. Some indeed chose to remain slaves after fulfilling their term of service. Slavery could be the best of one's options in certain circumstances, but it was still a less than ideal life.

It seems a pity that neither Jesus nor Paul spoke out against slavery. It seems it must have been an oversight that they did not demand that slavery cease to exist. Perhaps that was because it was a way for the poor to earn their keep, rather than a systemic means of denigrating a class of people. Be that as it may be, rather than speak out against slavery as an institution and argue for rights and freedoms, Paul spoke to the question of responsibility. It seems he is perhaps at odds with himself when to the Galatians he states that in Christ there is no distinction along the lines of gender, race, or freedom. He says enough in Galatians that we might recognize a higher ideal. Yet here his concern is not with our rights or the ideals of equality. His concern is with our responsibilities.

Our own society is greatly concerned with individual freedom, individual rights, and individual wealth. We are caught up in the drive to make our own way according to the opportunities around us and the rights we take for granted. Paul is less concerned with rights or even with release from slavery, persecution, and oppression. He did not write in a vacuum, but from the experience of oppression and persecution. He is still much more concerned with how we face the difficulties of life that arise from our station and relationship with others.

Slavery was not his concern. Oppression was not his concern. Freedom from the dictates of others was not his concern. After all is said and done, he considers that we are all slaves, anyway. We are not truly free, regardless of our status or role in society. In Christ there is no distinction, specifically because we are all slaves! Slavery is not something to escape; it is rather a hallmark of our very identity and relationship to God. While the enslavement of others is contrary to our equality before Christ Jesus, that equality is defined by our slavery to Christ Jesus as servants of the Almighty.

In Christ, we are indeed free—free to serve others beneath the banner of God's love.

**Determine where it is you may be struggling with a servant attitude, and give that up to God.**

***“Lord, help me see myself primarily as your servant and my work as opportunity to serve you.”***

## ***Twenty-Fourth Day:***

***“One day, Samuel told all the people of Israel, ‘If you really want to turn back to Yahweh, then prove it. Get rid of your foreign idols, including the ones of the goddess Astarte. Turn to Yahweh with all your heart and worship only him. Then he will rescue you from the Philistines.’” 1 Samuel 7:3***

How long had it been? This theme seems to keep repeating itself like a broken record among every generation of the Hebrew people. It was Moses' message upon crossing the Sea of Reeds. It was still Moses' message while passing the torch to Joshua. They were Joshua's words at the beginning and again at the close of his ministry. Throughout the period of the Judges, Samuel being the last, this had been the constant call to turn away from idols and embrace *Yahweh* as the only God worthy of worship. Samuel would not be the last to issue this call.

Oh, for every generation there were differences, but the basic the equation was the same. The specific gods being worshiped might shift from Ba'al to Astarte, to Molech, to Lilith, to Mal'ak, to Dagon, and so forth. The problem was ever the same. Each generation had to make its own choice to turn toward *Yahweh*. Each generation had to let go of its conflicting loyalties. Seemingly, one by one, each generation had likewise failed to pass faith on to the generation following on its heels.

The picture we carry of Israel as a nation wholly dedicated to *Yahweh* is often skewed by our knowledge of the New Testament and later rabbinic traditions. It wasn't until after the Babylonian exile, however, that the nation truly adopted *Yahweh* as their only God. Before that point, the worship of *Yahweh* was an ideal, a hope, an aim of official Israelite religion. It was a reality that waxed and waned. *Yahweh's* prophets called the people to faithfulness, but other prophets sounded competing calls. Rachel, Jacob's wife had hidden the family idols under her saddle upon leaving her family's home. Her idolatry was a constant conflict within the generations to follow. Gideon's first action as a judge in Israel was to tear down an altar to Ba'al. Elijah confronted 450 prophets of Ba'al retained by Jezebel. Jeremiah prophesied in faithfulness and spent time in prison for his efforts. Micaiah had the same experience as Jeremiah.

Jesus accepted the outward face of Judaism as worship of the one true God. He simultaneously called the people to lay aside the idols of their traditions in exchange for accepting the grace, mercy, and love offered by the One they claimed to serve. They worshiped God, but they held onto the idols of power, pride, prestige, wealth, and greed. They served the gods of their comfort, security, and the status quo, even while claiming to worship the Almighty alone. They clung to a legalism emphasizing personal effort and achievement over grace, love, and forgiveness. They missed the boat and failed even to recognize their idolatry.

The cry to put away idols was simpler back in the context of Samuel's day. The idols were visible castings of the deities proclaimed as a help to the people. The conflict with serving *Yahweh* was more apparent than the conflicts of competing claims for time, focus, activities, and the pursuit of our happiness and advancement. Do we not make idols of our traditions, habits, and lifestyles which are just as much in conflict with the gospel of Jesus Christ?

**Ask God to show you the idols that are present and growing in your life.**

***“Lord, make me aware of those areas of my life I need to release into your care.”***

## ***Twenty-Fifth Day:***

***“I pray that your love will keep on growing and that you will fully know and understand how to make the right choices. Then you will still be pure and innocent when Christ returns. And until that day, Jesus Christ will keep you busy doing good deeds that bring glory and praise to God.”***     *Philippians 1:9-11*

We consider decisions as being made from concerns of knowledge. At times we also recognize that some decisions are made from emotions or passion. As our ideal, however, we profess to make our decisions on the basis of good thought and a thorough knowledge of the issues at hand. Whether or not we actually take the time for such an assessment of the issues, this is generally our cultural paradigm. An informed decision is the one we consider the best. So aren't everyone's informed decisions identical?

Social scientists tell us that it is not on the basis of an intellectual evaluation of the facts that we make most of our decisions. The majority of our decisions are based on an emotional attachment or identification. That is how we choose brands of groceries, cars, and merchandise from the shelves at our markets. It is how we choose which markets to enter or which websites we choose to visit as patrons. It is how we determine the TV channels we watch and the movies we choose to see.

This is not what Paul had in mind, however, on writing the Philippians. He did not want their decisions to stem either from emotion or from rational judgment. He wanted their decisions to spring as a byproduct of the growth of their love.

As John so often repeated in his letters, love is the central commandment and understanding of the gospel. Love is the basic application of the message and life of Jesus Christ. We are wont to rationalize our decisions and choices on the basis of evidence or on the basis of our emotional attachments. It is love, however, that is the true basis for decisions according to the grace of God. It is the perspective of love that teaches us to understand God's will.

It was not emotion that caused God to be born in Bethlehem or walk the hill to Calvary. It was not an assessment of the logical implications and probabilities that motivated Christ to allow his enemies to bind him and drag him away to torture and death. Neither was it the kind of romanticized love we so often see and hear portrayed on the air waves.

It was, however, love that Paul declares to be the best basis for understanding God's will for our lives. It was, after all love that informed and impelled Christ to come to earth. Love was the motivation of the Incarnation. Love was the structure of Jesus' ministry. Love was the background and foundation for grace, mercy, forgiveness, and the acceptance of sinful humanity by Holy God.

If love was the motivation of God's actions of redemption, the directing of Jesus' efforts to reach out to his own community, it is also the underpinning motif for our own understanding of God's will for our own lives. As Jesus said, it is by our love that all will know that we are his disciples. It is God's character, and the character of God's will.

**Test your decisions this week by how they relate to the love of Christ for others.**

***“Lord, make me more aware of your love, that it might flow freely through my life.”***

## *Twenty-Sixth Day:*

***“Hezekiah obeyed Yahweh, just as his ancestor David had done. He destroyed the local shrines, then tore down the images of foreign gods and cut down the sacred pole for worshipping the goddess Asherah. He also smashed the bronze snake Moses had made. The people had named it Nehushtan and had been offering sacrifices to it.” 2 Kings 18:3-4***

Who wants to worship a snake? Most people I know would rather have nothing to do with snakes. I know all too many people who are deathly afraid of any and all snakes. Their first thoughts are to kill a snake or to run from it. Worshipping a snake would appear to be a rather foreign concept to us. Fearing them is an easy thing to accomplish. Why would a people who lived where snakes abounded and had a history with snakes as threats to their society worship the image of a snake?

Backing up to Number 21, we find the story of this particular snake. This serpent had a special history with the people that went beyond their generalized association of snakes with fear and danger. This was the bronze serpent Moses had cast when a plague of poisonous snakes was biting the Hebrews in the wilderness. They were dying, and Moses had pled their case before *Yahweh*, asking for deliverance. God had him fashion a snake of bronze and place it on a pole in the midst of the camp. Any who were bitten might look to the snake and receive healing from *Yahweh*.

This snake had a history of connection with the redemptive action of God. It had been stored in the Ark of the Covenant to preserve it as a symbol of *Yahweh* coming to the rescue of a people bowing in repentance for their sin. God had overlooked the command to have no graven images in the case of this serpent. It seems, however, the rationale behind the commandment had risen up to strike the people. Instead of using this bronze serpent as a reminder of *Yahweh's* redemption, they had begun worshipping the snake as though it were God. They confused their Redeemer with the means of redemption, the message with its container.

I am reminded of a pastor who took a cheap copy of the New Testament during his sermon and began ripping out sections. He would read a text like, “If your eye causes you to sin, rip it out and throw it away.” Then he would rip it out saying, “Oh, we don’t really believe in that part of the Bible.” He would read another text like “Love your enemies” with the same action and response. He whittled the book in his hands down to portions we better tolerate, saying, “This is the Bible we believe, but some of you are sitting there more upset by the fact that I have torn pages from this book than with the fact that we ignore and disbelieve what it says.”

It is too easy to turn something good into an idol. For some that idol may be the very Bible on which we base our faith. We may shift our worship to a book from the One to whom that very book points. For others it is a set or style of songs, rather than their message. To others, it is one of various others structures of our faith: buildings, programs, traditions, or modes of worship. These are not God, however. At best, they point to God. True worship goes far beyond the codes and structures we use to express our faith. It is turning to God and allowing God to turn us to His will. Are we ready for that kind of intimate connection beyond the crutches on which we hang our faith?

**Allow God to help you review the patterns of your worship to seek him beyond their structures.**

***“Lord, help me to worship you, refusing any substitute for you as Lord and God.”***

## ***Twenty-Seventh Day:***

***“Anyone who belongs to Christ Jesus and wants to live right will have trouble from others. But evil people who pretend to be what they are not will become worse than ever, as they fool others and are fooled themselves.” 2 Timothy 3:12-13***

This is just not the part of the gospel we want to hear. It is not a good selling point in the marketing of our evangelism. “Come to Jesus and suffer!” I have not seen that slogan on too many billboards recently. “Think your life is hard, try Jesus!” just does not sound very catchy. Maybe that is why we ignore this part of the New Testament witness to Jesus and the gospel preached by folks like Paul. It’s just not cool or catchy.

So what do we do with this aspect of the gospel message? Mostly, we just ignore it and hope it will go away. After all, books like *The Prayer of Jabez* sell the gospel people flock to buy. Joel Osteen is the preacher with the trendy message people are craving: “Come to God and be rich!” “God wants you to have a life of ease, success, and wealth!” “Oh, Lord, expand my borders and make me wealthy, great, prosperous, and famous!”

Jesus preached about success from a starkly different standpoint: “If you want to be great, learn to be the servant of all.” He defined success and blessing radically different from the way we do. “Blessed are those who mourn.” “Blessed are those who thirst.” “Blessed are the poor.” “Blessed are the hungry.” “Blessed are you when all men revile and curse you because of me.”

Why did Jesus have to make all those comments, anyway? It’s a lot more pleasant to assume he did not really mean them. It is easier to spiritualize their application and ignore any purposeful intent on Jesus’ part. It is easier to overlook the suffering Jesus and Paul spoke of as real, intentional, and actually part of the gospel. It runs far too contrary to our own aims to lend it any validity. Certainly, Jesus was only speaking of those times when the church is facing persecution, of times long ago when faith was not acceptable within a society like ours, of a context we have finally overcome.

Then we read that the geographical center of Christianity is now south of the equator. We hear that the church grows the most during times of persecution, than times of peace and prosperity. We find in our own history that as Americans became more affluent we left the church behind. We exchanged the glories of comfort for a gospel message of sacrifice, devotion, and dedication beyond the limits of personal comfort.

School now claims more importance for our families than church, faith, and discipleship. We give our social contracts more priority than our contract of faith with Christ Jesus. We want faith to alter our political and social arena to makes our lives easier. The result of our efforts, however, is that we exchange the demands of faith for the comforts of our social contracts, leaving the gospel behind in the balance. We fool ourselves and become the evil society we were taught to abhor, exchanging the gospel of Christ for a message of comfort, a lullaby to help put the gospel to rest. If it awakens, we’ll just give it a sleeping pill.

**Consider what the gospel has cost you and where you may have neglected to bear its burdens.**

***“Lord, grant me to understand the blessings of the gospel beyond the costs I would refuse.”***

## ***Twenty-Eighth Day:***

***“Araunah answered, ‘Take it, Your Majesty, and do whatever you want with it. I’ll even give you the oxen for the sacrifice and the wheat for the grain sacrifice. And you can use the threshing floor boards for the fire. It’s all your!’ But David replied, ‘No! I want to pay you what they’re worth. I can’t just take something from you and then offer Yahweh a sacrifice that cost me nothing.’” 1 Chronicles 21:23-24***

So what is the point of sacrifice, tithes, and offerings? We struggle as Araunah did with issues of form, substance, and meaning. Araunah was concerned with questions of form. He was also worried with issues of pleasing the king. David had authority to simply requisition his threshing floor, oxen, grain, and anything else he might consider needed. David could have demanded anything as king, and it would have been handed over. On one level, Araunah knew that, and he was likely seeking, at least in part, to avoid the king’s anger. Things would go better with him if he were to offer the king more than was requested. On the other hand, giving lavish gifts to the king might also ingratiate himself with power, and that was always a good idea for self-advancement.

David looked beyond these issues, however. He was not so concerned with form, neither with the politics of gifts, nor even with allowing Araunah to participate in the sacrifices he planned to offer. He was more concerned with the purpose of sacrifice. He was concerned with gaining an audience with *Yahweh*—with pleasing God.

The formality of ritual is not what *Yahweh* was seeking. Going through the motions of offering sacrifice did not address the questions of heart, attitude, dedication, and an earnest desire to join in fellowship with God. There is a difference in authentic, honest worship and the ritual forms by which worship is enacted. One is an internal question of heart, motive, and dedication. The other is the external question of rituals which may be reduced to a show.

Worship can also be a show, in that it may include a well-crafted and presented program. Even so, worship must be so much more than a show. It must flow from an attitude and desire to draw near to God and seek the will of the Almighty in our lives.

Araunah was perhaps more concerned with pleasing the king than with pleasing God. David recognized that pleasing God required worship to include participation and personal cost in the act of presenting an offering and sacrifice. What cost him nothing would likewise gain him nothing. If he did not materially participate in the sacrifice, he would not spiritually participate in worship or in God's response to the offering he presented.

Attending the sacrifice would not bring David into God's presence, as it did not open David's life to dependence upon God. To what extent do we participate in worshipping God? Are we doing more than going through the motions and formalities by presenting ourselves in earnest dedication to God? If our worship costs us nothing and does not impact our lives, it is at heart worthless both to ourselves and to the God in whose presence we ostensibly enter to present our service.

**Give something of value to God—bring yourself to worship as an instrument in his service.**

***“Lord, help me to evaluate my dedication and my participation in worshipping you.”***

## ***Twenty-Ninth Day—Fifth Sunday of Easter:***

***“My work is to be a preacher, an apostle, and a teacher. That’s why I am suffering now. But I am not ashamed! I know the one I have faith in, and I am sure that he can guard until the last day what he has trusted me with.” 2 Timothy 1:11-12***

Would that Paul’s words were an aberration from a norm of life in ministry! It would be nice to believe the reality with which Paul dealt had been overcome in the centuries of witness to Christ Jesus and the gracious love of God presented in the ministry and resurrection of Christ. Jesus should have been the only one to suffer on behalf of the gospel, as its message is one of redemption for millions who have come to Jesus from the throes of oppression, injustice, and persecution. If we open our eyes to the realities of church history, we know better that to believe that pipe dream.

There have been prophets faithful to God across the centuries of Christian witness. Almost without reservation their lives have been plagued by the realities to which Paul spoke. Martin Luther spoke against the excesses of the Catholic Church in his day and was greeted with the threat of death. In England, the Puritans were oppressed for their opposition to the papacy and the political control of one’s expression of worship by the Church of England. Baptists fled persecution in England for daring to preach and baptize without authorization by the power brokers of the day. In America they were jailed at times for the same insults to officials in the colony governments.

We led part of the fight for religious freedom and separation between church and state. We wanted freedom for all parties, as we had understood the problems of state-sponsored religion from the inside of the Culpepper jail. The Bill of Rights was a victory in the struggle for freedom to speak from the dictates of conscience before God. It protected the voices of Baptists, Methodists, Quakers, and many others who chose to distance themselves from the confines and dictates of a state church. The Bill of Rights in the Constitution was a victory for the freedom of the pulpit and religious speech. It did not end the problem of persecution, suffering, and animosity towards those whose calling had them speak the message of God to a broken world, however.

Martin Luther of Germany dared to translate the Bible into a German the common people could read. Martin Luther King, Jr. dared take the words of the gospel to heart that in Christ there was no distinction between one man and another, regardless of race, gender, or station in life. They both suffered for daring to speak the word of God to a social and religious order wishing to keep the message at bay. Martin Luther was protected by a prince with political interests in breaking the political hold of the Catholic Church. Martin Luther King, Jr. had no such earthly protector.

Struggles for power have threatened the fabric of many denominations in recent years. Ministers, professors, churches, and institutions alike have suffered under the abuse of power by those threatened by others speaking from conscience their witness to the message of God. Where that message has not supported the structures of power, voices have been and continue to be threatened, muzzled, or silenced. Too often, it has been those outside the church whom have responded in love while those within resorted to violence and vitriol—the establishment in opposition of grace and love.

**Assess your own attitudes toward those who speak a different voice, for love rather than anger.**

***“Lord, grant me love for those who differ and clarity to hear your voice over power’s concerns.”***

## ***Thirtieth Day:***

***“So Yahweh made sure that every prophet warned Israel and Judah with these words: ‘I, Yahweh, command you to stop doing sinful things and start obeying my laws and teachings! I gave them to your ancestors, and I told my servants the prophets to repeat them to you.’ But the Israelites would not listen; they were as stubborn as their ancestors who had refused to worship Yahweh their God.” 2 Kings 17:13-14***

“Start obeying...” That nuance of the prophetic message seems strange. Most other translations cast the words differently, but this is their import. Surely, there had been obedience to *Yahweh*. The people were obeying at least in part. There was enough obedience to *Yahweh* over the generations for the prophets to encounter some knowledge of God and some summary of *Yahweh*’s will. The nation was at least aware of the overall structure of God’s will for their lives. It would seem from the narrator’s perspective, however, that the problems ran much deeper. There was perhaps even plenty of lip service to worshipping *Yahweh*, but little in terms of substance.

They were still worshipping other gods. They were still bogged down in idolatry and the customs of their neighbors involved in fertility cults. They held onto the name of *Yahweh* while they also worshipped at the altars of Ba’al, Asherah, and Molech. It was not that they ignored *Yahweh* as God of Israel. It was the fact that their allegiance to *Yahweh* was mingled with their worship of competing gods, and the rites and rituals of fertility cults. In essence, however, it boiled down to the issue that they had not begun to worship *Yahweh* in accord with God’s design.

*Yahweh* as the only God for Israel was the first of the commandments. It was also the second and third. They had taken the name of *Yahweh*, but they were not living according to the implications of that name. To begin worshipping *Yahweh*, they had to take the first step of putting away all other allegiances which interfered with the worship of *Yahweh*, the only God for Israel.

The narrator of Kings placed the blame for the deportation and exile upon this constant neglect for *Yahweh* and the consistent seeking after the idols of the nations. The idolatry of Jeroboam became a plague that visited most of the subsequent generations of Israel.

The problem was that they wanted the blessings of being the people of *Yahweh* without accepting the responsibilities of being the people of *Yahweh*. They wanted God’s protection, but they wanted the control over their lives, harvests, and wealth that the fertility cults offered.

Through participation in the fertility cults, they could control the procreation of their herds, the germination of their seeds, the brining of rain. That is, at least, what they were designed to do. They were a way to increase wealth and control over the inhospitable or capricious forces of nature. *Yahweh* was too great a God to bend and bow to the will of a people. The lesser gods of fertility cults, however, were closer to their beck and call. Here they had a chance to control them and gain power over their lives. *Yahweh* would be in the background for when they needed more than the fertility cults offered. True worship of *Yahweh* required a very different commitment than they were willing to accept.

**Take stock of competing allegiances in your life and place them in submission to Christ Jesus.**

***“Lord, help me to begin to serve you in full allegiance, not simply in name or convenience.”***

## ***Thirty-First Day:***

***“Don’t turn away God’s Spirit or ignore prophecies. Put everything to the test. Accept what is good and don’t have anything to do with evil.” 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22***

It is an easy thing to ignore the seemingly erratic voice of those claiming a word from God. All too often we hear the ravings of fancy with claims to be from God. Many are deluded by television personalities who reportedly speak on God’s behalf, yet speak mainly to the filling of their bank accounts and increasing their view ratings. In the face of such excesses, it is simple to turn to the traditional moorings of our faith in order to discount any messages which counter or critique our received traditions. By following just such a pattern, the Jews on the First Century too readily ignored Jesus’ gospel of grace through faith. As I saw on a church sign recently, “There is nothing so dark as a closed mind.”

Even so, the opposite response is no more appealing. To so open our minds that we make no distinction between one claim and the next leaves us unmoored and subject to the dictates of the most recent flight of fancy. This may be the more common thread of response in some circles today, yet it ignores any basis of reality that would support one claim over another. While philosophically more alluring to many, it completely ignores the scientific method on which so much of our society is based outside the walls of religion and philosophy.

Paul did not want people to brush aside his words, but neither did he want his words accepted uncritically. As Luke writes in Acts regarding the Berean believers, they were nobler for hearing Paul’s message and painstakingly checking it out against the witness of Scripture. This is the attitude Paul encouraged. It is one thing to run after those words we long to be from God, but quite another to take stock of our heritage, received tradition, and new exposure, evaluating all of it against the witness of Scripture.

Over my years of ministry, I have met a man claiming to be one of the prophets from the Revelation to John. I have heard others avow a word from God through dreams and visions. I have had the experience of a special dream that appeared revelatory. I have heard laity and clergy alike claiming God had spoken to them on one or another issue. Some I tended to believe, the word of others I could not accept. In all occasions, however, the operative concern was not, nor should have it been, a question of whether I liked what was said. At issue was testing such witness against God’s revelation in Christ.

It is too easy to rely on the interpretation of others regarding the Bible or doctrines about God and God’s will. It is too easy to find people ready to interpret for us and accept the burden of responsibility for the study of Scripture. As Baptists claimed over two centuries ago, however, there is none other to stand before God than the individual. We must therefore accept and assume the responsibility to examine what reports to be from God. We must assume the task of weighing the disparate voices and claims of Divine revelation. We are enjoined to test everything, not in an offhand manner, but with integrity. We are then to keep what is truly good. There is to be no margin for that which is evil. If we accept love as the greatest attribute of God in Christ, it will also help us define those things which are good, giving us reason to abandon all else.

**Take the time to test and weigh truth claims against the revelation and love of Christ Jesus.**

***“Lord, make me more sensitive to what comes from you, that I might cling only to Christ.”***

## ***Thirty-Second Day:***

***“I was ashamed to ask the king to send soldiers and cavalry to protect us against enemies along the way. After all, we had told the king that our God takes care of everyone who truly worships him, but that he gets very angry and punishes anyone who refuses to obey. So we went without food and asked God himself to protect us, and he answered our prayers.” Ezra 8:22-23***

I worshiped with a church in Brazil whose sanctuary was in dire conditions. Termites were eating the exposed beams, as well as the very pews. The roof sagged under the ceramic tiles, as the wooden supports quietly eroded under the termites' attack. The members lamented the conditions of the building, throwing up their hands in despair and resignation. “We need to get the Americans to come back and build us a new sanctuary.”

The congregation was poor, and several were out of work. Over several months I preached about trusting God. Finally one of the members spoke up, saying, “We say we worship an Almighty God. We say our God can move mountains. Here we sit, however, with a roof about to collapse on us. It is a bad witness to the community. It is time to stop lamenting and actually trust God to help us build something worthy of Christ Jesus.” The church finally recognized that the issue before them was not a question of finances, but of faith, trust, witness, and spiritual dependence upon God.

Banks in Brazil do not generally give construction loans to churches. What loans are available come at rates greater than twenty percent over inflation. Few of the church members had income. Many were wives of unbelievers who held the reigns over their finances. Several families were unemployed. They prayed about the question of their place of worship. They decided they needed to honor God and take a step of faith into the unknown.

With the \$400 in the bank, they threw together a fellowship area on a patio out back—cinder block walls with a corrugated roof. They contracted with a firm to tear down the old sanctuary for what might be salvaged. One member was losing his construction job. He decided to offer the church free labor for four months instead of taking the new job he was offered. Two years later, they were worshipping in a new sanctuary with seating for 250 and no loans to repay.

Faith calls us to do more than state a claim of dependence on God. Faith calls us to more than talk about God's love and provision. Faith calls us to enter into a relationship in which trust is the only support for life. A claim for God's power is empty when we refuse to place ourselves in a position to depend on the trust inherent in that claim. Faith demands that trust be transformed from words into action. It is there also, that our witness becomes reality and a viable message of God's sufficiency.

Are we willing to allow our witness to the greatness and love of God to become a practical reality in our lives? Otherwise, we simply spout empty words devoid of meaning—words we should be shamed to pronounce. It is in action and practice that our claims of faith are transformed into realistic witness for God. Effective witness and evangelism does not start with words. It begins with the action of faith—trusting God according to our claims of God's faithfulness.

**Take stock of where God is calling you to faithful action and trust.**

***“Lord, make me an effective witness by acting upon my claims of faith in you.”***

## ***Thirty-Third Day:***

***“Everything is pure for someone whose heart is pure. But nothing is pure for an unbeliever with a dirty mind. That person’s mind and conscience are destroyed. Such people claim to know God, but their actions prove that they really don’t. They are disgusting. They won’t obey God, and they are too worthless to do anything good.” Titus 1:15-16***

Some would be tempted to quote Paul as a voice to eliminate concerns of morality and parameters for acceptable action. Paul was not speaking of morality, however. He was addressing issues of Jewish tradition, legalism, and dietary regulations on food. These were concerns over ritual purity. Codes of ritual purity were to assure that God would accept an offering being presented. They were questions of sacrifice and participation in temple worship. They included things like the ritual hand-rinsing that Jesus had been accused of allowing his disciples to ignore before eating. They were questions of certain foods and people considered to be unclean, yet whose state of purity was brushed aside in Peter’s vision upon the visit of Cornelius.

Ritual purity, according to Paul, was an impossible standard, yet also a roadblock in the path of true purity. It focused on the wrong issues and enslaved one to a ritualistic observance, rather than the worship of God in the wholeness of life.

Ritual purity was concerned with a woman’s monthly flow of “blood” and a man’s issue of semen. Ritual purity was concerned with contact with the dead or diseased. Ritual purity was concerned with questions of procedure, not with questions of the heart and faith. It was about appearance. It was also built on the notion that God could not have interaction with anything ritually unclean. So much for God taking on human flesh and living in an unclean world, touching lepers, healing outcasts, ignoring rituals designed over ceremonial purity concerns!

Jesus was not seemingly concerned with issues of ritual purity, but was very concerned with moral and ethical purity. This is where he focused his attention. What went into the mouth, he called unimportant. What flowed from the heart, he considered indicative of one’s standing before God. This is what Paul was addressing for Titus. The rituals and legal wranglings of Jewish traditions regarding ritual were something Titus should ignore. They were not spiritual, after all, but a deviation from God’s true concerns. It was the matters of the heart with which God was concerned—moral and ethical purity.

Ritual purity was like our concerns over proper attire for worship. It was like discussion over the form of Baptism, rather than as demonstrating the conversion of one’s life. It was akin to worries over the correct style of music for worship, the correct version of Scripture, the patterns of religious observance, and the order of a service. It is rather the heart of our dedication to serving God that should occupy our attention. These other concerns are unimportant in comparison to living a life of worship in purity before God.

Jesus was not so concerned with the trappings of religious expression. He was concerned as Paul with the heart and its purity before God. Missing that focus indicates we are missing the very gospel.

**It is time to assess where our emphases may be falling short of the gospel of Christ Jesus.**

***“Lord, help me to accept your concern with the heart, transforming my purity by your ideals.”***

## ***Thirty-Fourth Day:***

***“When the other officials asked Mordecai why he disobeyed the king’s command, he said, ‘Because I am a Jew.’ They spoke to him for several days about kneeling down, but he still refused to obey. Finally, they reported this to Haman, to find out if he would let Mordecai get away with it.” Esther 3:3-4***

Mordecai had good reason not to bow before Haman. It was a question of honoring *Yahweh*, and *Yahweh* alone. He also had good reason to bow to Haman. The king had issued the command that all should bow before Haman. To refuse to bow to Haman was to disobey the king. Mordecai’s position was that he should bow to none but *Yahweh*. This stance left him in a precarious situation. He had the choice to follow his conscience before God or to follow the demands of the power structures around him.

Haman was not pleased by Mordecai’s decision. Haman took offense at Mordecai’s sense of integrity in singularity of worship. It would be tempting to follow the lead of Naaman the Syrian, whom Elisha had healed of leprosy. Naaman had begged the forgiveness of *Yahweh* when he should serve his king and in so doing bow before the idol of Dagon. For him, it would not be a question of worship, but of service to the king of Syria. Doubtless there was call to treat this forcible bowing to Haman in the same vein. Mordecai was being compelled by the authorities to bow. It was, therefore, not a choice, but a matter of necessity.

That was not Mordecai’s take on the issue, however. For him, it seems to have simply been a question of following the convictions and responsibilities of one serving *Yahweh* as the only God. His people had been deported for failing in faithfulness to *Yahweh*. Here in exile, they had learned their lesson about singleness of worship. The issues of bowing to *Yahweh* alone were clearer now than they had ever been for the people.

Like Daniel’s friends called on to eat the king’s food and bow to the king’s idol under threat of death, Mordecai assumed God was serious about bowing to no other. As Daniel and his friends refused to compromise on principles of worshiping *Yahweh*, so did Mordecai. If God’s command was to mean anything, it would have to include those occasions when it was less than expedient to honor and obey the dictates of God’s will.

Despite threats of revenge and possible death, Mordecai stood firm in his faith. He trusted that somehow God would make it right. Somehow God would honor Mordecai’s decision to honor *Yahweh* above the dictates of the power structures surrounding him.

Faith is not always easy. We are wont to compromise of what are seemingly lesser issues. It may be following a boss’ orders to keep a job. It may be bowing to the demands of culture to simply go along with the flow. Rarely do we feel threatened with life for pledging faithfulness to God. At some point, however, we must face the issue that faithfulness requires faithfulness, regardless of the category of opposition we face.

If faith is real, what is too high a price to pay for one who gave his life for us on the cross?

**Ask God for the courage to trust His faithfulness, regardless of the opposition around you.**

***“Lord, grant me clarity to understand your will and the courage to follow through faithfully.”***

## ***Thirty-Fifth Day:***

***“But don’t have anything to do with stupid arguments about ancestors. And stay away from disagreements and quarrels about the Law of Moses. Such arguments are useless and senseless. Warn troublemakers once or twice. Then don’t have anything else to do with them. You know that their minds are twisted, and their own sins show how guilty they are.” Titus 3:9-11***

Oh, the things which distract us from the important matters of faith! It is so easy to focus energy and attention on matters that seem important, but are actually secondary to the gospel. We look at the issues that concern us personally. In general, they are those issues that make us feel comfortable, “in”, and grant us a special place in the context of faith, doctrine, or relationship with God. We seek assurance of our membership and status within the people of God. Without meaning to, we pit ourselves against others to place ourselves ahead of the pack.

For the Jews Paul addressed in this argument, it was concerns with heritage—a heritage backed up by Biblical witness to the heritage of God’s people. They were concerned with their place in the history of Israel. They assured themselves of being children of the promise to Abraham—something even more important than attention to the traditional interpretations of Mosaic Law. In Jesus’ ministry, it had been the tradition of interpretation that had been the biggest sticking point. That hurdle was not quite settled, but the focus shifted to another point of avoidance.

At heart, that’s what it was about. They were getting off track from the gospel, avoiding the real issues of faith, love, grace, mercy, and humble service to God. That had been the major theme of the prophets throughout the witness of the Hebrew Scriptures. “Turn back to *Yahweh*,” they had said. “What *Yahweh* really wants is justice, mercy, and caring for one another.”

As long as the discussion centered on other things, living up to the ethics of the gospel could be sidelined. When the talk was about circumcision, dietary norms, rituals, regulations of Sabbath observance, and concerns of ancestry, loving one’s neighbor automatically took second place. When the issues at hand were something other than responsibilities toward God and one another, they tended to pit one set of people against another. They still do.

Our distraction issues often are actually socio-political, though we cast them as integral to the gospel. We declare “the Christian position” on one or another issue, with more emphasis on our belonging to the right group than the love and grace of Jesus. Of late, these discussions are just as often concerns of doctrine and practice. We look for the right way to think and cast all others as suspicious and or heretical. We concern ourselves with the right way to perform, ignoring that our concerns are questions of culture, not of gospel. Like the pastor who decreed a vacation from music in worship in response to the culture wars over musical styles, we may need to lay aside all our discussions and disagreements to focus on what really matters.

When will we be ready to lay aside wrangling over questions that are less important than Jesus’ summation of the gospel. Love God with all your heart, mind, and soul—and your neighbor as yourself.

**Determine what issues are distractions in your life from focusing on the gospel of Christ.**

***“Lord, grant me the wisdom to give importance only to what really matters to you.”***

## ***Thirty-Sixth Day—Sixth Sunday of Easter:***

***“Then Yahweh asked, ‘What do you think of my servant Job? No one on earth is like him—he is truly a good person, who respects me and refuses to do evil.’ ‘Why shouldn’t he respect you?’ Satan remarked. ‘You are like a wall protecting not only him, but all his property. You make him successful in whatever he does, and his flocks and herds are everywhere. Try taking away everything he owns, and he will curse you to your face.’” Job 1:8-11***

These verses encapsulate the basic premise of the book of Job. If God pays us with earthly blessings for our righteousness, are we truly righteous, or are we just working to earn God’s blessing, and therefore only superficially righteous? On the other hand, true character only verifiably rises to the surface when things go wrong for us. When all goes well, our truest character remains untried, untested, and therefore unknown.

At heart, we want to be paid for our service to God. Deep down, we want to earn our keep, for it gives us a sense of self-worth and control over our lives. We are likewise averse to the idea of watching the evil, greedy, and underhanded get away with unrighteous actions, manipulate the system, and enjoy material success. We often watch with a sense of being misused and cheated as the burden of restraint. We compare our level of comfort with the likes of a Bernie Maddoff, Wall Street speculators, or bailout executives. We wonder how so many get away with so much, wishing there were a more fair way of apportioning wealth according to righteousness and character.

Economic wealth is no indicator of righteous standing before God. If anything, the accumulation of wealth would tend to raise questions regarding one’s true measure of righteousness. The real question and assessment come in times of crisis, loss, grief, and pain. It is how we face the storms of life that portrays the character of our faith and faithfulness to God. On the other hand, it is often during times of economic downturn that a people turn to God in a dependence forgotten in times of plenty.

Righteousness simply does not correlate with wealth, status, or even one’s standing in society. It is just too easy to hide one’s unrighteousness in the guise of social uprightness. We are all too familiar with the scandals of political figures, trapped in their behind the scenes misdeeds against their projections of propriety. The public face does not reliably show the heart; neither does material blessing evidence one’s faithfulness toward God.

God was not averse to Job’s wealth, but neither was God averse to the idea of taking away Job’s prosperity. This was not a question of punishment. It was a question of growth. In the context of adverse conditions, and only then, Job’s character had its chance to shine forth and be exercised. Growth flows from stress, not from comfort. Righteousness needs exercise from the experience of pain, difficulty, suffering, and loss. This is where we move from knowledge about God to a true dependence upon God and the will to live accordingly in righteousness. It is also the life chosen by God in Christ Jesus, who amid conflict and opposition openly displayed the meaning of love, grace, and righteousness in example for us all. The Lord of all creation did not enjoy the material blessings we are wont to expect from God. Rather, he lived a life of hardship that we might see his true character and worth.

**Check your decisions for the motivations behind them and what they say you value.**

***“Lord, grant me the wisdom to look beyond material rewards to living a sincere righteousness.”***

## ***Thirty-Seventh Day:***

***“If you consider me a friend because of Christ, then welcome Onesimus as you would welcome me. If he has cheated you or owes you anything, charge it to my account. With my own hand I write: I, PAUL, WILL PAY YOU BACK. But don’t forget that you owe me your life. My dear friend and follower of Christ our Lord, please cheer me up by doing this for me.” Philemon 17-20***

While Paul does not condemn slavery outright, this letter is the closest to a condemnation of the excesses and abuses associated with the institution. He condemns the patterns of injustice and mistreatment of others through illegal or legal means. What is legitimate from the standpoint of law, may not measure up to the ethical standards of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Philemon had every legal right to punish, abuse, and even put Onesimus to death for his escape as a slave. Rather than help Onesimus remain escaped as we might wish Paul to have done, Paul sent him back to his condition as a slave with this letter demanding grace. The institution of slavery, after all, was not the problem to face. The real issue was the mistreatment and abuse of those whose lives legally hung in dependence upon the goodwill of their masters. It was the attitudes associated with the institution that demeaned the slave as a life of lesser value.

If we look around in our own society, there are plenty of evidences of the abuses inherent to an institution of slavery under a different legal guise. There is obviously an ongoing illegal slavery trade in human and sex trafficking in our nation, for sure. While we grant bailouts to firms mismanaging billions in assets, we uphold laws that make public requests for economic aid by the poor violations of the legal code. There has ever been prevalence for mistreating the poor, and especially immigrant populations. At times, economic subjugation works on two groups of people at once.

I spoke with an African-American man recently laid off from his job along with a host of other employees. They were let go in order to hire an immigrant labor force at cheaper wage rates. One minority lost income, the other was given work at a lower pay scale and moved into very rustic factory-owned living conditions across from the warehouse. While perhaps not precisely illegal, it is in effect the same kind of abuse through economic means that we decry in the institution of slavery in our past.

Paul did not condemn slavery outright as an institution. He did, however, call for a higher ethical treatment of those dependent upon others in power. He also reminded Philemon of a greater priority than economics—that of spiritual issues and living with a perspective on eternity. His concern was not over what was legal, but what flowed from grace, mercy, and love.

Perhaps it is time we reviewed once again the effects the institution of slavery in our past holds over the attitudes we bring to business and economics today. Abolishing the institution of slavery did not abolish its attitudes. World War II did not abolish attitudes of Aryan supremacy. The Civil Rights Movement of my childhood did not overcome the disparities of valuation according to race and social class. The issues before Paul and Philemon are alive and raging before us. What responsibility will we assume to right the attitudes of abuse and oppression still prevalent in our midst?

**Evaluate how you can be an agent for justice, grace, mercy, and peace among all.**

***“Lord, help me see how my actions impact the lives of others, that I might love as did Christ.”***

## ***Thirty-Eighth Day:***

***“Here is something else I have learned: the fastest runners and the greatest heroes don’t always win races and battles. Wisdom, intelligence, and skill don’t always make you healthy, rich, or popular. We each have our own share of bad luck. None of us know when we might fall victim to a sudden disaster and find ourselves like a fish in a net or birds in a trap.” Ecclesiastes 9:11-12***

This is not the message our society longs to hear. We are much more interested in the concept of the Olympic competition in which we assume the best competitor will win. Somehow we yearn to believe that the best musicians are those on the popular concert circuit, the best record labels, and the front pages headlines. Then we are surprised by the likes of Susan Boyles—an unknown, dowdy, spinster who astonished both judges and audience in the program, Britain’s Got Talent.

A middle-aged unknown became an instant celebrity on television and the internet by reminding us that there are stars in unlikely places, hidden by the economic pressures of media, big business, marketing, and special interests. Those we see as the winners and stars in the spotlight suddenly seem no longer to be the greatest talents they are portrayed to be. They appear suddenly as the few with the lucky breaks in a world entertainment market dominated by few brands and special interests.

We follow the sporting achievements of favorite teams, only to find they are not necessarily the talent we want to believe, but the products of illegal performance enhancers or perhaps the targets of schemes to disqualify them in favor of others athletes or teams. We recognize that our mass market capitalism does not really allow for the best, brightest, and most talented to rise to the top. All too often, it is rather they most devious, scheming, and wily characters who rise to prominence in promotion of one or another special interests and the financial gain of a few.

We recognize the disparity between talent or skill and opportunity or marketing. We know that politics, intrigue, nepotism, and manipulation are all too often deciding factors in who wins the contests in the marketplace of business, education, and opportunity in life. Almost invariably, however, we ignore that knowledge, acting as though only the best, wisest, strongest, and brightest rise to positions of prominence.

Fortunately, God does not deal in the same categories. God is not duped or induced to accept the production of the market and its promotion of our slate of winners. God looks not at accomplishments in our market for pitting one against another for superiority. God looks rather at questions of character and our internal battles to become the people we were created to be. God looks to the evidence of lives given not to the pursuit of external rewards of publicity, wealth, and market sponsorship, but to grace, mercy, justice, and love.

The prize of public acclaim and contests do not always go to the very best. Perhaps we should say they very rarely do. Yet the real prize is also not to those with the characteristics we prize so highly. It is not for the greatest actors and performers, but for those with the greatest faithfulness and character to whom the real prize is given—the friendship and acclaim of God.

**Run your race for the audience who truly matters—the only One worthy of being called Lord.**

***“Lord, help me live according to your definition of righteousness, not settling for appearances.”***

## ***Thirty-Ninth Day:***

***“So if we refuse this great way of being saved, how can we hope to escape? The Lord himself was the first to tell about it, and people who heard the message proved to us that it was true. God himself showed that his message was true by working all kinds of powerful miracles and wonders. He also gave his Holy Spirit to anyone he chose to.” Hebrews 2:3-4***

Here is the crux of the singularity of the gospel message. What do we do with the gospel of Christ if we do not accept it? There are so many who claim to love God, desire to go to heaven, want to avoid hell, and consider that God is too loving to condemn anyone to eternal punishment. Somehow, they assume that since Jesus is love, we will all get off scot free. In the meantime, what are they doing with the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Perhaps the problem is that we have spoke too much of heaven and hell. In the balance, we have ignored the gospel. Let me rephrase that: we have spoken too much of heaven and hell as destinations. Our question has been, “Where will you spend eternity?” Perhaps the question should have been more along the lines of “Where does God figure into your life and its continuation through eternity?”

It is true that the term heaven is used in the Bible as a destination—a location. It is also true the term is often used as a reference to God or being in God’s presence. This second sense is theologically the primary one. As a geographical reference, heaven designated being in God’s presence, around the throne of heaven. It is to be present with and in fellowship with God Almighty, not kicking back in gold-trimmed hammocks on the crystal shore. And that is just the problem.

We prepare our lives for a destination, but give too little thought about the relationship on which eternity depends. The writer of Hebrews just assumes we understand that salvation is about being in relationship and fellowship with God. He takes for granted that we are seeking an audience with God Most High. That is, after all, the whole point of rescue, redemption, and salvation. It is the very point of becoming the people and therefore the children of God.

If, then, we should ignore Christ Jesus and all he has done to bring us to reconciled fellowship with God, how are we then to join our lives with God for all of eternity? In Romans 8, Paul speaks of Jesus as being the priest, the sacrifice, the intercessor, and the one hearing our case, as well. When god has gone to such lengths to rescue us from ourselves and offer us eternal fellowship, any response other than acceptance of Christ Jesus is a rejection of God. How can we come to God if we have already rejected forgiveness and reconciliation?

Too many are too unprepared for approaching God. We have sold the wrong merchandise and neglected to grasp salvation as a personal relationship with God. The streets may be paved with gold, but if we are not prepared to walk them hand-in-hand with God, we are not prepared to enter the pearly gates. If we are not prepared to live as Christ Jesus demonstrated the gospel before us, heaven will hold no blessing we will be able to enjoy. If we do not fully embrace Christ Jesus, what is the point of escaping an eternity without God?

**Make sure that you are preparing for an eternity of fellowship with and service to God.**

***“Lord, focus my attention and will on serving and loving you above all else.”***

## ***Fortieth Day:***

***“Yahweh says: ‘Don’t brag about your wisdom or strength or wealth. If you feel you must brag, then have enough sense to brag about worshipping me, Yahweh. What I like best is showing kindness, justice, and mercy to everyone on earth.’” Jeremiah 9:23-24***

Kindness, justice, and mercy have no need to brag. They are not focused on the one employing them. They find their focus instead on meeting the needs of others. Their rewards are internal, not external. They are their own fulfillment, not requiring the praise or the apparent inferiority of others. They create worth in their own right, without the need of comparison with others.

Bragging, on the other hand, focuses on building one up from comparison with or praise from external sources. If I need to brag, it is because I feel unappreciated, unworthy, or in some sense less than someone else. Bragging betrays a personal sense of inferiority that must be muted by external voices of praise and comparison to those who do not measure up to one’s achievement.

Jeremiah asserts bragging as a futile exercise. We can never reach the stature of God. We can never truly measure up. Instead, we should look to God for a true source of fulfillment, purpose, and worth as servants of the Almighty. God would have us brag in regard to participation in God's action of kindness, justice, and mercy to any and all. Significantly, to everyone on earth, not just those toward whom we would naturally act with kindness, justice, and mercy.

We tend to see the Hebrew Scriptures as promoting the idea that only the chosen people were worthy of *Yahweh’s* attention. We read them as ethnocentric, setting forth the worth of this nation as far above that of the rest of the peoples of God’s creation. Jeremiah would beg to differ. He posits God’s words as negating such a concept. He characterizes God as caring just as much for any and all other peoples as for the descendants of Abraham. There was nothing intrinsically special about this one nation in particular. They were no better than the rest. They did not need, however, to compare their worth to that of other nations. There was no good reason to brag about their standing before God in order to establish themselves as superior. What was needed to establish any true sense of superiority, was for them to live and act according to the character of *Yahweh*, the one to whom they claimed to belong.

If their lives were characterized by kindness, justice, and mercy, that would in itself establish them above the other nations. If they were to allow God's character to flow through them, they would not be struggling with a sense of inferiority or the need to compare themselves with other nations. The kindness, justice, and mercy of *Yahweh* would refocus their attention off their inferiority complex and create the sense of worth they needed from within.

The nations considered these attributes of true righteousness. Caring for the destitute, powerless, disenfranchised, and foreigners was a shared concept of righteousness. What was lacking was the will to follow through according to *Yahweh’s* desire. If they would bow to serve God responsibly, that would give them worthy grounds to establish a superior standing among the nations. The only thing lacking would be to accept the superiority that comes from serving according to God's character and identity.

**Give kindness, justice, and mercy room to grow in your life, increasing your sense of worth.**

***“Lord, grant me the confidence that comes of trusting you and living the character of Christ.”***

## ***Forty-First Day:***

***“Don’t forget all the hard times you went through when you first received the light. Sometimes you were abused and mistreated by others in public, and at other times you shared in the sufferings of others. You were kind to people in jail. And you gladly let your possessions be taken away, because you knew you had something better, something that would last forever.” Hebrews 10:32-34***

What do we hold as truly valuable? To the author of Hebrews called for a different perspective from that of our society, even our Christian society, to address value from an eternal perspective.

We are so often trapped by the cares of life. We hear so often the messages all around that worth and value are wrapped in concerns of wealth, popularity, status, entertainment, and wielding power over others. We should enjoy this life to the fullest—eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow is uncertain. Live in the now! That is the message we heard through all our media outlets. Success is measured in one's current circumstance and relationship to others with power, wealth, and social standing.

We find a very different message in this text from Hebrews. Rather than focus on issues of comfort, possessions, prestige, and status, we are to recall how the early Christians placed their emphasis on loving others, being kind to those in jail, and giving up their rights to earthly possessions in lieu of an eternal reward of greater consequence. Rather than concerning themselves with advancement in the here and now, they looked to suffering as the manner of Jesus' example set before us.

If Jesus gave up right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” according to our national understanding of our inalienable rights, why should we be less than willing to live accordingly as his followers and disciples? An eternal perspective may be difficult to maintain or even adopt against the backdrop of so many materialistic messages we receive daily. On the other hand, for so many of the First Century Jews, there was no concept of life in eternity with God. They were living for God's blessings in the moment—the only life they expected to have. These new believers accepted the reality preached by Christ Jesus that there was an eternal reward of much greater consequence for those who were faithful to living according to the gospel of God's grace.

They were not simply being faithful against a materialistic backdrop, but a full denial of the reality of an eternity with God. They lived in contrast with the message of an eternal hope. In that hope, they trusted this new perspective of eternity to carry them through suffering, imprisonment, torture, and the loss of their material possessions. They were ridiculed for holding to such a seemingly impossible hope. It was amid this ridicule, persecution, and suffering, however, that the perspective of a worthy faith found nurture and real growth.

Are we willing to live according to that same take on the gospel and eternity? It would require a fresh evaluation of our priorities, financial commitments, and the application of our time and energy. It would mean a reassessment of what truly matters and the determination to live according to that assessment. It is not necessarily an easy road to travel, yet for us it is so much easier than for those early believers. Then again, perhaps life is otherwise just too comfortable for us.

**Determine what would be too high a price for you to pay in regard to the gospel.**

***“Lord, grant me the clarity to see the issues of life from the perspective of eternity.”***

## ***Forty-Second Day:***

***“You were a healthy vine covered with grapes. But the more grapes you grew, the more altars you built; the better off you became, the better shrines you set up for pagan gods. You are deceitful and disloyal. So you will pay for your sins, because Yahweh will destroy your altars and images. ‘We don’t have a king,’ you will say. ‘We don’t fear Yahweh. And what good are kings?’” Hosea 10:1-3***

Prosperity and faithfulness to God often run counter to each other. That was the experience of the Hebrew people. When things were going well economically, they forgot their dependence upon *Yahweh*. When things were going badly, they blamed *Yahweh* for abandoning them. How ironic were those accusations! When things got bad, they would cry out to *Yahweh* for answers, and then ignore God in times of plenty.

The king was the military protector of the nation, in charge of national security. He was also the head spokesman for and to *Yahweh*. He was the one who would bring the people in line with God’s will and priorities. He would represent the nation before God. He would then act as head prophet and priest of God before the people. This second aspect of kingship lay quickly forgotten. At the death of Solomon, the nation quickly drifted away from *Yahweh*. They remained concerned for political interests, but not with their responsibilities before *Yahweh*. The wealth and prosperity of Solomon’s days put them on track to ignore God in exchange for their own issues of comfort.

Our own history is not so different. During periods of economic crisis, people would flock to our churches. During periods of abundance and wealth, our churches were often transformed from centers of worship to clubs for social gratification, entertainment, and patting ourselves on the back for success in a thriving economy.

When we prosper, we consider it the fruit of our labor, intelligence, skill, and the investment of our energy. When things go wrong, it is God, the economy, or other forces beyond our control. As we show little consistency in valuing our efforts and God’s role in our lives, so our worship and dedication to God show little consistency, as well.

In the 1970’s, Southern Baptists were on track with Bold Mission Thrust. Our churches were growing and our giving to mission causes was growing. Then we got off track with concerns over power and struggles for control of denominational agencies. We spent enormous amounts of money on our comfort and entertainment, while neglecting the greater purposes of Christ Jesus. Where we used to build hospitals, seminaries, and schools overseas, our missions spending decreased to much smaller investments in preparing disciples in our mission efforts. We took our focus off God’s purposes to attend to the idols of our personal comfort and wealth.

The largest of our churches seem to have adopted the model of our society’s focus on comfort and entertainment. The smaller of our churches seem to have focused inward on comfort and maintenance of the status quo. On both ends, we have too often ignored God and focused on ourselves, instead. Is it not time to return God to the center of our lives as King and Lord of all?

**Consider where issues of prosperity and comfort may have taken your life’s focus off God.**

***“Lord, help me to focus my life according to your priorities, instead of my own.”***

## ***Forty-Third Day—Seventh Sunday of Easter:***

***“Faith makes us sure of what we hope for and gives us proof of what we cannot see. It was faith that made our ancestors pleasing to God. ... But without faith no one can please God. We must believe that God is real and that he rewards everyone who searches for him.” Hebrews 11:1-2, 6***

In the Greek New testament, the word faith is often a verb. It is not something concrete to obtain or hold; it is something to do. It is perhaps better translated as trust. Trust makes us sure and confident. It gives us the proof we need when logic offers no proof to be seen. It is trust which allows us to live in a manner is pleasing to God—trust that God exists and rewards those who seek God.

Trust is so much more than belief. We can hold to many beliefs. We can accept beliefs that are actually contradictions of each other, even without realizing it. We can believe what is not true. We can reduce faith to the acceptance of a list of truths, much as the First Century Jews attempted to do along with their traditional interpretations of Mosaic Law. We can look upon a set of beliefs as though they were the main ingredient of faith, yet faith carries us beyond such a meager definition. It is that trust and confidence we place in the One we believe.

It was Abraham's trust in God (“Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” — Genesis 15:6) that set him apart in his day. It was the action of trusting, of placing his confidence in God, despite evidence pointing to the lunacy of such a confidence. Faith is not well grounded by the verifiable proofs sought in so many efforts at Christian apologetics. Faith is rather the confidence that in Christ Jesus the character of God is displayed as greater than what we would otherwise deem adequate. It is confidence that the purpose of life in Christ is of greater value, even if it requires suffering due to persecution or abuse at the hands of others. It is the confidence that faithfulness to God find great enough reward in God's satisfaction and care.

Faith is the conviction that there is more to this life than meets the eye. There is One to whom we owe allegiance; One who rewards us for seeking purpose and life in that allegiance to a higher ethic for living. There is no proof. There is no logical argumentation which makes faith work according to a tightly-held system of beliefs, premises, and conclusions. There is simply an inner conviction that there is greater meaning and purpose in life by seeking relationship with God, and that God honors our efforts to join in fellowship with the Almighty.

This then, is faith—trust in the goodness and willingness of God to bless us in spite of the contrary circumstances we may experience in life. It is not the insecurity inherent in assuring that others hold to the same beliefs we hold dear. It is rather the security of knowing that God is sufficient to carry us beyond the limits of our understanding.

We need not have all our theology correct, our knowledge perfected, and our system of doctrine in a neatly polished box. We need rather the relational dependence upon God that allows us to trust in the sufficiency of God in Christ to overcome our limited understanding. We must trust beyond the bounds of our ignorance, beyond the categories of our limited knowledge.

**Assess the role that trust plays in overcoming the limitations of your understanding of God.**

***“Lord, grow my trust in you beyond the limitations of my understanding that I might live faith.”***

## ***Forty-Fourth Day:***

***“Israel, I am Yahweh God, and the Ethiopians are no less important to me than you are. I brought you out of Egypt, but I also brought the Philistines from Crete and the Arameans from Kir. My eyes have seen what a sinful nation you are, and I’ll wipe you out. But I will leave a few of Jacob’s descendants. I, Yahweh, have spoken!” Amos 9:7-8***

These were hard words for any Israelite to hear. They were, after all, the chosen people, the descendants of Abraham, the children of the promise. *Yahweh* had hand-picked them from among the nations to be a special people under the care of the Almighty. While the other nations were under the care and handling of lesser gods, the people of Israel was special, set apart, uniquely cared for by *Yahweh*. Israel was no great nation among others in the Ancient Near East. They were not especially wealthy, powerful, or sought after for trade and special skills. All they really had going for them was their special relationship with *Yahweh*.

Amos’ words just seemed to dash the national sense of dignity, pride, and esteem. All they really had going for them was being special to *Yahweh*—God’s chosen, prized possession among the nations. Now Amos had to go and say that this special relationship was simply a measure of grace. *Yahweh* had chosen them as a special possession, but did not care for them more than others. That would take the wind out of their sails. It definitely did not earn Amos any brownie points.

It would seem that even in Jesus’ day the people had not accepted the reality behind Amos’ words. They were still struggling to feel special on the basis of Abraham as their ancestor. They clung to privileged status from a question of birthright. In the process, they ignored and overlooked God’s interest in the other nations—an interest held on the same level with which God prized Israel.

Jesus struggled with the disciples to bring them to the understanding of Amos. It was only long after the resurrection that Peter finally understood that God held the Gentile nations as worthy of the love and grace of Christ Jesus. Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles flew in the face of accepted ethnocentric norms prevalent among Jewish society. Over and over again, the prophets spoke this same message to the chosen people, but the message fell on deaf ears.

Worst of all, all too often we fail to hear the message today, as well. We like to think more of ourselves than we ought, just as the Hebrews and Jews of Amos’ and Jesus’ day. We look to our standing as children of God, born anew under the grace of Christ Jesus. In the process, we somehow fail to glimpse that it is through grace that we are God’s children. It is not for any inherent superiority over others, but the simple fact that we have accepted God’s offer of grace.

Unintentionally, perhaps, we look down on others who have yet to hear or respond to the gospel as though they were of lesser value to God. That is not the case at all. They are simply those we have failed to embrace in the love of Christ, failed to reach with the message of God’s grace. Like God’s people through the ages, we need a constant reminder to look upon the entire world as God’s beloved creation and value those outside the realm of faith even as Christ, who loved them enough to die.

**Check your attitudes toward those outside your comfort levels and boundaries of faith.**

***“Lord, help me to view all with the depths of your love, becoming more aware of your grace.”***

## ***Forty-Fifth Day:***

***“But you have forgotten that the Scriptures say to God’s children, ‘When the Lord punishes you, don’t make light of it, and when he corrects you, don’t be discouraged. The Lord corrects the people he loves and disciplines those he calls his own.’ Be patient when you are being corrected! This is how God treats all his children. Don’t all parents correct their children? God corrects all of his children, and if he doesn’t correct you, then you don’t really belong to him.” Hebrews 12:5-8***

We all seek belonging. We want to belong to clubs, societies, churches, corporations, and other groups we deem important. We seek to be vital parts of our families and circles of friends. If we are not empowered with a sense of belonging, we may simply cut ourselves off from such circles to live in a self-constructed anonymity to assuage our sense of failure to belong.

Belonging, however, is that to which God calls us. It is the issue of faith with which we may be most compelled to struggle. On the one hand, we may be afraid of God’s attention. On the other, we may fear not measuring up to the expectation of belonging to God. We want to belong, but we fear the unintended consequences of God’s attention, presence, and interruption of the comforting sense of life as we know it. We fear that God might indeed punish us for not measuring up to the demands of the gospel and the lordship of Christ Jesus.

We miss the point of such discipline. We equate discipline with an understanding of punishment flowing from revenge and anger. We look to our own attitudes toward those who have offended us and project those attitudes on God. In so doing, we miss the purpose of God’s discipline. It is not a simple punishment in the sense of revenge. God’s discipline is correction to equip and lead us into the better paths of life—the paths on which we truly belong and find belonging.

One reason we miss the point of God’s correction is that issue of belonging. In our desire to belong, we desire to live without the need for correction. We look at belonging as a static goal—a simple destination at which we need only arrive. This is the way we so often look at life’s goals. We look to graduation without the understanding that it is a beginning point. We consider beginning a career or job without much thought to the tasks and responsibilities they bring. We plan weddings with less thought to beginning a marriage. We look at retirement without considering its associated loss of contribution and the meaning and structure that works brings to our lives. We consider coming to God in faith without much attention to relating to God throughout eternity.

We want to simply belong. We do not want belonging to require a continued investment of our time, energy, and resources. We want to hold a job without showing up to work, begin a college career without classes and homework, and enjoy the blessings of marriage without building on the relationship on a constant basis. Yet if these issues require constant nurture and growth on our part, a life of faith in belonging to God requires no less.

Thus God comes to correct and direct our actions and lives, bringing us closer in our relationship of belonging to God. We are not merely introduced to God, but called to live with God forever.

**Take stock of how God would correct the course of your life to greater intimacy with Christ.**

***“Lord, grant me the desire to continually seek closer relationship in belonging to you.”***

## ***Forty-Sixth Day:***

***“The sailors were frightened, and they all started praying to their gods. They even threw the ship’s cargo overboard to make the ship lighter. All this time, Jonah was down below deck, sound asleep. The ship’s captain went to him and said, ‘How can you sleep at a time like this? Get up and pray to your God! Maybe he will have pity on us and keep us from drowning.’ Finally, the sailors got together and said, ‘Let’s ask our gods to show us who caused all this trouble.’ It turned out to be Jonah.”*** *Jonah 1:5-7*

Jonah did not seem to care much how his actions affected others. If the ship he was on sank with all the sailors, he was not concerned. Then again, that was the attitude that brought him on board the ship, anyway. He was unconcerned for Nineveh, unconcerned for the sailors, and too engrossed in his desire for revenge against his enemies to worry with any collateral damage that might result from his actions in fleeing God’s call to preach repentance in the city of Nineveh.

Instead of praying, he slept. Instead of sharing any concern for the shipmen who had allowed him on board, he kept aloof. He preferred his death to allowing Nineveh to hear the message *Yahweh* had entrusted to him. He would rather die than allow Nineveh the chance to escape judgment. If that meant the ship would also be lost, so be it. His depression clouded any sense of compassion. His anger wiped away questions of concern for others—if such concern had ever been there.

He did not bother to help them out or point to the fact that he knew why the storm had engulfed them all. He waited until they had cast lots and God had pointed him out as culpable. Only in the light clarifying his guilt was he ready to accept the fact that he was placing the lives of others at risk. His self-absorption kept empathy at bay, refusing to look at the sailors as men with lives of any value. It was only when *Yahweh* allowed the lots to point to him that he stooped to confess that he was the one for whom the storm had come.

Jonah was acting less like a prophet and more like the original suicide bomber. The people in his way were not persons, but objects. His anger, pride, and sense of superior purpose placed all else at bay. There was little room left for God to work in his life and correct the course of his actions. Anger was in control. His enemies, the Ninevites were at fault in his eyes. To be honest, in his estimation, God was really the one at fault.

His anger was really at *Yahweh* who had sent him on this errand to Nineveh. He did not want to go. He did not want another to go. He was battling *Yahweh*’s very purpose of mercy, warning, and offer of grace. Without recognizing it, perhaps, he was adopting the very characteristics he despised in those he had deemed enemies, and therefore worthless.

“Death and judgment to the merciless!” was his cry. He wanted to wipe out that worthless people who committed atrocities against his own nation, never recognizing just how like them he had become in his sense of moral superiority. Smug and self-satisfied in his anger against Nineveh, he did not see just how like his enemies he also needed the mercy and grace of *Yahweh* for his own attitudes of violence. He was no better than those he wished to die, precisely for his desire for their deaths.

**Take stock of your own sense of anger and righteousness indignation toward others.**

***“Lord, grant me the courage to look at myself in the same way I assess the worth of others.”***

## ***Forty-Seventh Day:***

***“Don’t blame God when you are tempted! God cannot be tempted by evil, and he doesn’t use evil to tempt others. We are tempted by our own desires that drag us off and trap us. Our desires make us sin, and when sin is finished with us, it leaves us dead.” James 1:13-15***

We often like to cast blame outside ourselves for our temptations and failures. We become angry because of what others have done—it’s their fault. We act on that anger and feel justified in blaming the one who failed or injured us. We seek revenge and plan retribution, considering it justified as no one else will make the originator of our loss pay for our pain. If we cannot somehow escape in attributing the very temptation as naturally coming from our enemy, we avoid guilt by pointing to Satan or demons as responsible for our attitudes and inclinations.

There is some Biblical justification for blaming temptation on supernatural sources. James, however, does not seem to buy it. His first response is to say that God is never tempted with evil. It is just contrary to God’s very nature. Love does not seek evil, but good, as Paul would put it. John would define God’s major attribute as love, a love that expels fear and retribution. James goes further in this text. He argues that no external tempter is necessary at all, when it come to sin. We must look deeper to see our own responsibility for the very temptations for us to sin.

Temptation may have an external factor, but they must begin closer to heart. They begin not from the outside, but internally with our own desires. You might be tempted to eat a fresh, cool, juicy piece of cantaloupe, but I would not. It may look good to you, but its fragrance turns my stomach. I have no desire for cantaloupe within me, so there is nothing on which such a temptation might build. Any temptation is only really effective when it matches a desire already within us. In James’ words, then, it is from within that temptation originates. It begins not with any external offering or presentation, but with the internal desire where such an offer finds resonance.

God would not tempt us to sin. The devil did not make me do it. My hand was not forced by demons. Circumstance, salespersons, and marketing schemes are not to blame for my indulgence or over-indulgence. They have a foothold simply because of the desire that already abides within me.

The temptation to hate, anger, and revenge does not begin with those who offend me, but with my own propensity to violence, my insecurities which lead me to obliterate opposition to my fragile security. Greed does not begin with an assessment of the wealth of others. It simply finds opportunity based on my own desire to own, control, and acquire more and more. Lack of submission to God begins in my desire to retain control, my fear of life getting away from my desires and chosen direction. Temptation and sin originate from within. The external bearer of temptation is secondary.

Until we accept responsibility for our very temptations, we cannot accept the reality that they bring us step by step closer to death and destruction. They are contrary to God’s desires for us because they kill and destroy rather than aid us toward life. We need not wage war against sin and temptation, so much as the illicit desires we harbor. That is where the battle is ultimately won or lost.

**Take a look at the desires that lead you to be open to temptation.**

***“Lord, work on my desires that they might be transformed by your love and grace.”***

## ***Forty-Eighth Day:***

***“Our God, no one is like you. We are all that is left of your chosen people, and you freely forgive our sin and guilt. You don’t stay angry forever; you’re glad to have pity and pleased to be merciful. You will trample on our sins and throw them in the sea. You will keep your word and be faithful to Jacob and to Abraham, as you promised our ancestors many years ago.” Micah 7:18-20***

We all need comforting words now and then. We hear so much bad news. We see the prevalence of corruption and sin even among those calling themselves the church, God’s people. We see violence, destruction, and pitting the interests of one over another, families torn apart, lives destroyed by addictions, and failure to give meaningful commitment to faith in Christ Jesus. We need comfort.

We need a respite from the demands on our time, energy, and resources. We need mercy, grace, refreshment, and hope. For some reason, we don’t expect such a message in the Hebrew Scriptures. We are supposed to find an angry God, here, but we find rather a God whose coin in trade is mercy, grace, and love. This is a God who uses forgiveness for a greater purpose than allowing an escape from the consequences of our sin. It is mercy, grace, and forgiveness designed to strengthen us for a new lease on life according to the will and direction of God.

Perhaps we are too much accustomed to thinking of God in the guise of an inimical state trooper. We tend to picture God lying in wait for us to do something wrong, in order to write us a ticket or send us to prison in retaliation for our misdeeds. The trooper has little interest in our lives as long as we live within the bounds of the traffic rules and laws of the state. That, however, does not do justice to the Micah’s perspective on *Yahweh*. This God is very much interested in the rest of our lives. This is, after all, the same *Yahweh* who appeared to Abraham, calling him to a new land and offering the promise of a future. This is a God who enjoys blessing a people and offering grace and mercy in order to lead them in the paths of justice and righteous living.

Despite our unfaithfulness, God remains faithful. Despite our lack of mercy, God deals in mercy. Despite our unforgiving attitudes, God freely offers forgiveness. These are not attitudes of one removed from us with little concern for the daily experiences of our lives. It is rather the character of one who cares more for our reconciliation than with punishment and our isolation.

The purpose of mercy and forgiveness in justice is restoration. It looks less at one’s misdeeds and more at helping one overcome failures to meet higher standards of character and being. Its purpose is to comfort—to come alongside in order to strengthen, encourage, and enable—not to destroy. This is Micah’s understanding of *Yahweh*. There is none other like *Yahweh*, willing to look beyond punishment to comfort, restore, and renew.

Perhaps we could learn more from the attitude Micah saw in *Yahweh*—an attitude which desires to restore, comfort, strengthen, and encourage, rather than to destroy those who offend us. Interestingly, this Old Testament picture of God is a glaring indictment of our own character where we miss the mark of the ethic of Jesus Christ.

**Determine where you fail to give comfort and deal in the compassion of Micah’s God.**

***“Lord, grant me to receive your comfort that I might in turn share comfort with others in need.”***

## ***Forty-Ninth Day:***

***“Don’t be ashamed to suffer for being a Christian. Praise God that you belong to him. God has already begun judging his own people. And if his judgment begins with us, imagine how terrible it will be for those who refuse to obey his message. The Scriptures say, ‘If good people barely escape, what will happen to sinners and to others who don’t respect God?’ If you suffer for obeying God, you must have complete faith in your faithful Creator and keep on doing right.” 1 Peter 4:16-19***

This passage seems a reversal on our popular notions of an angry God in the Old Testament and a loving God in the New. Certainly, Peter comes from a background that would tend to emphasize God’s judgment more than we see in the words and deeds of Jesus Christ. At work here is also the idea common in Judaism of the day that everything that happened for our good or ill was tied closely with God’s operant will. While that is also a common thread in the increasingly popular versions of a Calvinistic theology, there is more going on here than such an interpretation would adequately explain.

Peter is not addressing concerns over minor difficulties in the scope of life. He is not interested in a concept of God’s controlling any and all events in our lives. To be sure, he offers in the immediate context words stipulating an active choice in our response to events surrounding us. Rather, Peter is looking to a time of active judgment in the world—a time when events stress and clarify the intent and character of groups and individuals.

We might be misled at first blush by the term judgment. It is not the same as condemnation or a call to account for one’s actions. It is a time of clarifying—declaring who one’s true identity and character. Peter points to something akin to a cardiac stress test. He saw in the events of persecution surrounding the emerging church a context in which one’s faithfulness and commitment to Christ Jesus was being questioned, weighed, measured, or judged by the character of one’s response to adversity.

Jerusalem had been destroyed in A.D. 70, and Judaism was re-orienting itself with the loss of the Temple. Believers in Christ were being shoved out of the circle of Judaism and seeking their own new sense of identity, as well. They were no longer welcome under the protective umbrella of Judaism before the Roman laws and demands for participation in Roman cultic practices. They found themselves attacked and pressed from Gentiles and Jews alike. It was a time to test the mettle of one’s commitment and faith in Christ Jesus. For the sake of Christ and faithfulness to the gospel they might be imprisoned, beaten, tortured, or killed.

Peter called for a different perspective on the issues at hand. Similar to John’s later message in Revelation, they were to allow the time of testing and pressure to clarify the reality of their faith—their commitment to the gospel of Christ, despite the opposition of the world in which they lived. It would do them no good to bow before the demands of society and refuse Christ. They were rather to accept that to follow Christ Jesus might well mean participation with Christ Jesus in their own crucifixion. It was time to declare the reality of their faith, regardless of the short term cost.

Are we ready to look beyond the short term cost of discipleship to follow Christ in faithfulness?

**Determine where it is that you are prone to place limits on God’s call to faithful service.**

***“Lord, grant me the clarity to see life from the perspective of eternity and the example of Jesus.”***

## ***Fiftieth Day—Pentecost Sunday:***

***“Yahweh All Powerful told me to say: ‘People of Judah, I, Yahweh, demand that whenever you go without food as a way of worshipping me, it should become a time of celebration. No matter if it’s the fourth month, the fifth month, the seventh month, or the tenth month, you should have a joyful festival. So love truth and live at peace.’” Zechariah 8:18-19***

So much for a somber, depressed service as pleasing to God! Worship is to be a celebration of joy an interaction. This joy is not simply an option in Zechariah’s witness, but a direct command of *Yahweh* that our worship spill over from an attitude of rejoicing in God’s love.

Fasting was traditionally associated with mourning in sackcloth and ashes. It was often understood as a special level of piety that would gain God’s attention for one’s dedication and self-defacing sacrifice. God would have to be impressed with someone going without food! If *Yahweh* were impressed, God would be more likely to grant one’s petition. Certainly, God would be much more interested in looking in on a people mourning, wailing, and doing without, than with a people at a party, living it up with a good time. Zechariah had a different take on God’s interests.

*Yahweh* wanted a people who could enjoy being together, celebrating, and inviting God into the midst of their celebration. God had created life to be enjoyed, celebrated, and rejoiced over. Certainly, God had demands to place upon life with boundaries for human action and interaction. These limits were not designed, however, to inhibit joy and celebration, but rather to direct life into a more fruitful and worthwhile experience. To worship *Yahweh* should be integral to one’s joy over living. A fast might focus one’s attention, but it should be focused in celebration, not despair.

To enjoy God is the intent of Zechariah’s take on worship. Even in fasting and petition, we are to come into God’s presence with joy and the recognition of God’s care and blessings for us. The puritanical take on a mournful piety is not *Yahweh*’s understanding of proper worship, at all. God is not so much to be feared, but to be revered with joyous celebration.

Sure, the Christian life is a life of dedication, commitment, and call to a higher plane of ethical morality. It is, however, a life of joyous experience of God’s presence and being God’s presence before others with the full joy of the Creator’s love and blessing upon a people called to the purpose of reflecting the Creator who rejoices over the whole of creation.

Worship is a reflection of wonder and the enjoyment of God’s care and presence. It is time to put away the sackcloth, ashes, and long faces as we gather to celebrate the goodness of God—God’s great love for us and God’s loving provision for a life of beauty and blessing for others.

We have plenty to celebrate. It is time to take up Jesus’ call to celebrate, even in times of fasting, as Zechariah would remind us. There is reason to sing, dance, and rejoice in the love of God poured out for us in Jesus Christ and evidenced in our lives by the coming of God’s very breath, the Spirit of the Holy One which is for us.

**Determine to transform your worship in celebration of God’s goodness amid sincere discipleship.**

***“Lord, teach me to celebrate you and honor your presence and action in my living.”***

I pray this devotional series has been of benefit to you in your walk with Christ Jesus. We speak of walking with Christ, for discipleship is not a destination, but a journey of faith. We seek greater intimacy with God—the One who gave his very life in Christ to live within our hearts and lives through the Spirit.

May the blessing and presence of the Spirit shower your life with the comfort and strength of God's presence.

If you would like to receive my weekly sermons via email, please fill out the contact form on my website: [http://www.theotrek.org/about\\_us/contact.shtml](http://www.theotrek.org/about_us/contact.shtml)

May the peace of Christ Jesus may be yours as you seek to walk in His presence and allow the Spirit to touch the world through you.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*

# Who is Central in Your Life?

