

WEEK 53 THE BODY OF CHRIST-----Dennis Watson

Paul wrote to the church at Corinth to address divisions that had come to the body there. In the passages we see this week he was stressing that the Holy Spirit had given gifts to the members of the church to be used in the church “for the profit of all.” In his devotional book for children Marty Marchowski uses the illustration of a beehive. That is a great illustration to show how God gave different bees different tasks in the beehive for it to function correctly. The queen bee lays eggs. The drones care for the queen. The nurse bees feed the baby bees. There are worker bees which go and get food. There are bees that guard the bee hive and others that cool it. Each bee has a job to do. The same is true in the church. Each member of the body has a gift or gifts given to them so that the body can function and accomplish its purpose.

DAY 1

FIRST READ 1 CORINTHIANS 12:1-11

In **Ephesians 4:12** Paul says that different gifts were given, “*For the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body.*” In today’s passage Paul makes a very significant point for the Corinthians and for us—it is the Spirit of God who gives the gifts to the members of the body. This is significant because in the church at Corinth there were divisions that were largely brought about by jealousy! He wanted them to know that the Spirit gave those gifts according to His determination. The word Spirit is used ten times in these eleven verses. Paul does this to stress that it is the Spirit who determines the gifts. Since that is the case there is no room for jealousy or gift envy. Each person was to develop and use the gift the Spirit had given to them.

From the negative standpoint he was dealing with jealousy but on the positive side he was dealing with the unity that the Holy Spirit brings to the body. The gifts He gives are complementary and go together so that the Body of Christ functions to accomplish the task of evangelizing and making disciples all over the world. This is all miraculously accomplished by the work of the Spirit. Paul opens this chapter with a statement that no one comes to Jesus apart from the working of the Holy Spirit. All of what a believer, a church, or any group of believers accomplish is done by the work of the Holy Spirit. No one can take credit for his or her gift or gifts. No one can take credit for the accomplishments of the Word of God. The church is made one by the work and power of the Holy Spirit of God. Our rejoicing, celebrating, and any boasting is in what He does. The church is a beautiful thing! It is a mighty testimony to the power of God and the indwelling work of His Holy Spirit.

Give thanks for your gifts and the gifts of others with whom you are blessed to collaborate to be the Body of Christ.

DAY 2

FIRST READ 1 CORINTHIANS 12:12-26

Here we have a great picture of the necessity of all the members of the body. The picture he gives of the body and all the different body parts comes across very practical. Can you imagine your body parts having a discussion and your ear saying it is envious because it is not an eye? Or can you imagine your foot having resentment because it is not a hand? Sounds silly but he is making a point! Apparently this was going on in the church at Corinth. People were jealous and envious of gifts that others had. Paul was telling them that it took all the parts of the body, each doing its part for the body to work correctly. He wanted each of them to find their gift and get to work working with the other parts.

One of my favorite verses in the Bible related to the church is **1 Corinthians 12:18**, *“But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased.”* Look at that verse again. I always think of a jigsaw puzzle and the person assembling it placing each piece in its place just as the picture demands. Some of my favorite puzzles are pictures taken by wildlife photographer Ken Jenkins. He took the picture and puzzle makers turned them into 1000+ piece jigsaw puzzles. Each piece has a place. God has a vision and plan for His church and He has made each one of us and He places each one in the body according to His plan. Each part is necessary to complete the picture! I love the thought of that great biblical truth! Each person God brings to His church, for us—Harp’s Crossing Baptist Church, He has brought there by His plan, design and will. I know we all like to think that He really does that with pastors but it is not limited to pastors. He brought you to His church and placed you there with your gift just as He wanted! Wow, that is incredible. Each of us is not only important but like a puzzle we fit together!

I personally believe that if each born again believer would get about the work they have been given in and through the Lord’s church, many of our struggles as individuals, families and churches would disappear.

Get connected to His church. Find out where you fit. Use your Spirit-given gift in connection with others and enjoy the beauty of the Body of Christ

DAY 3

FIRST READ 1 CORINTHIANS 12:27

In the middle devotion each week we look at how the passage connects to the gospel. This week we look at just one verse, a very short but amazing verse. It reminds us that each of us individually is part of the Body of Christ with each one collectively being the Body of Christ. This is actually only spiritually comprehensible. The Body of Christ is the church all over the world as one. It is the church located in communities all over the world and it is each individual believer. We are joined together by the Spirit of God and made to be one unit.

When Jesus came to our world born as an infant He lived and carried out His Father's will here on earth for thirty-three years. We call that the incarnation. Jesus was at once fully God and fully man. God became flesh and dwelt among us. He was the living presence of God in the world for those thirty-three years. The church, which Paul calls the Body of Christ, continues that work but as a body of people redeemed by the work of Jesus Christ.

I have often used the terminology that the church is "the continuation of the incarnation." That is semantically incorrect. It is important to always be learning and part of learning includes recognition of wrong and replacing it with truth. Semantically it is wrong but in theory the concept is correct. We continue the redemptive work started by Christ but the church can save no one. The church has been commissioned by Jesus Christ to go into the world and make disciples. However, Jesus was fully God and fully man. The church is not. The church is empowered by the miraculous presence of the Holy Spirit. The church is made up of people who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ and then sent to shine the light of Jesus in the world.

I am not God and neither are you. We have been saved by God through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. We continue His work, but only He can save. We are miraculously connected to the life of God through Jesus Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Give thanks to Him that you have been included in the greatest endeavor the universe will ever know. We are the body of Christ carrying out His will by making His gospel known to all people.

DAY 4

FIRST READ 1 CORINTHIANS 12:27-31

It is definitely important to understand that it is the Lord, through the Holy Spirit, who gives the gifts to the members and assigns the offices. He has a perfect plan for His church as a whole and for each local congregation. God works in and through individuals, local churches and through the universal church. No single church has all of the gifts but each local body has exactly what they need. The church at Corinth was blessed, considering that the occasion for Paul writing the book was to address the problem of carnality. The people were carnal. They were saved but due to the failure to live Spirit led lives, they were carnal. Paul points out in 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 the problem facing the believers at Corinth and still plaguing churches and believers today is carnality. The word carnal in the Bible is only used by Paul. Paul explained that there are two kinds of people in the world—natural (unsaved) and spiritual (saved). He also explains that there are two kinds of saved people—mature and immature. The immature are living carnal lives which means fleshly or fleshy. This is a contrast. The believer is either living according to flesh—natural desires, or the Spirit—spiritual desires. The problem in the church at Corinth was the people were still immature and living fleshly lives. This showed up in the disputes and one of those disputes had to do with spiritual gifts.

Paul told the people at Corinth that God gives the gifts according to His determination. He also tells them that some gifts are more significant than others. In the church there are gifts and offices of which some are obviously more significant than others. The gifts that lead, proclaim, and teach are of greatest importance. But that is not to say that other gifts are not significant and necessary. Regarding your own physical body you can get by without a hand, arm, foot, finger or toe but you cannot survive without your heart or brain. Each part is significant. All do not have the same gift. There is a variety. But Paul goes on to encourage them to desire the greater gifts.

One commentator expresses verse 31 this way:

The believers should desire the most helpful gifts. In other words, in the desire to be helpful in the body of Christ, they should seek the power of the Spirit. Too often this verse is only applied individually when the emphasis should be on the church as a body. The church ought to desire the most helpful gifts so that it can function well. It would be incorrect to interpret Paul as saying “desire the most helpful gifts” to mean “seek the gifts from the top of the list” (12:27-28). Paul had been stressing diversity of gifts and the necessity for the gifts to be interactive within the body. He could not have thereby excluded healing or tongues as lesser gifts. In addition, he

could not have meant for the people to desire to be apostles—that was impossible, because only a few chosen men could claim that title.¹

Unity and diversity must be balanced by maturity, and that maturity comes with love. It is not enough to have the gift of the Spirit and gifts from the Spirit. We must also have the graces of the Spirit as we use our gifts to serve one another.²

Rejoice in the gifts you have and use them to build up the body of Christ!

¹Life Application New Testament Commentary.

²Bible Exposition Commentary (BE Series) - New Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – New Testament, Volume 1.

DAY 5

FIRST READ HOSEA 2:14-20

Day five each week is the time we look at a passage from the Psalms or one of the prophets to see how they connect to Jesus or our salvation.

In the Old Testament God would often speak of His relationship to His people Israel as that of a marriage. He was the husband and Israel was His bride. Hosea wrote and gave this picture of Israel as God's "betrothed." This is a picture of an engagement in which God promises to one day be His people's husband. We see in these passages the promises God makes to His people. There are several "I will" statements that God says He will do for His people. This is a very intense section of God's promises which point to Jesus. He will turn them away from their other gods (Baals) and turn them to Himself. He says that their sins will be taken away and that they will have a new relationship. They will no longer call Him "my master" but "my husband."

We read in the Old Testament that many of the promises are expressed to the nation of Israel. God is eternal; He has neither beginning nor ending. Therefore, He is totally self-sufficient and needs nothing more than Himself in order to exist or to act. "God has a voluntary relation to everything He has made," wrote A.W. Tozer, "but He has no necessary relation to anything outside of Himself." God needs nothing, neither the material universe nor the human race, and yet He created both.³ But by God's grace and His plan, His blessings extend to all people just as He promised to Abraham that, "All the people of the earth would be blessed." The beauty of this passage is expressed in verses 19-20:

"I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me In righteousness and justice, In lovingkindness and mercy;20 I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, And you shall know the LORD. Hosea 2:19-20 (NKJV)

Now let's connect some dots. Look at Revelation 21:2:

Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. Revelation 21:2 (NKJV)

Now that is exciting! Our spiritual roots run deep. See how the dots connect. Through God's people He has betrothed us to Himself. We are the Bride of Christ!

Thank God for this eternal relationship that had deep roots, even to the promise given to Israel and extended even to us.

³Bible Exposition Commentary (BE Series) - Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary - Pentateuch.

WEEK 54 Love-----Chris Watson

Scripture reminds us that this is how we know what love is, Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. We can only truly love others if we have received the love of God. This is love in its purest form. Do you have a hard time loving “others?” Have you received God’s love and are you putting that love into practice?

Day 1

First Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

The Corinthians were using their gifts, especially prophecy and speaking in tongues, primarily for their own purposes, rather than for God’s purposes. Christian love must be understood as flowing from God’s love. Everything we do without doing so in love is essentially worthless. We are reminded what love is in 1 John 3:16: Jesus laid down His life for us. He did that because He loved us and He showed it. Paul told the Corinthian church that any “good works,” including helping the poor, done without love were not profitable in any way.

This scripture begs the question, “What is my motivation?” When I was a child we had a video (yes, a VHS) that included a song with the lyrics, “Why do I do the things that I do and who do I do them for?” I listened to that song about 25 years ago and I still remember it to this day. Apparently the Corinthians were serving the poor, speaking in tongues, and prophesying, but doing so for themselves, rather than out of love for God and their neighbors. Their motives were completely wrong. We can think of some others in scripture who had this problem, including the Pharisees. They desired that people hear their long prayers and watch them give their large sums of money, yet there was no love in it.

What about you? Why do you do the things that you do? I think we could all say that our motives are at least sometimes wrong. First, you need to ask whether or not you have received God’s love; that is, have you put your faith in Jesus to take your sins away? If not, do so now. If you have, then you need to ask whether you are living out of God’s love and for God’s glory or for yourself? That is, are you trying to receive glory or accolades or is this about God?

As you go throughout your day ask, “Why do I do the things that I do and who do I do them for?” And if you discover God and God’s love is not your motivation, ask God to redirect you and change your heart.

Day 2

First Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Notice the things Paul says that love is not: envious, boastful, proud, rude, self-seeking, easily angered, and delighting in evil. If that is the case, then love is the opposite of those things. In essence, love is not selfish and it endures all things. I believe it is best said that love is a CHOICE.

Today many people today they “love pizza,” “love sports,” or “love the warm weather.” Obviously, saying these things compared to saying, “I love my spouse” or “I love my mom or dad” are two separate things. One is truly loved, while the other is really liked or enjoyed, if you will. Remember, though, love is a choice. Can you think of people that you love in spite of some choices or things they have done? For instance, do you love people who have made you mad or have been really ugly to you? The answer is probably yes. That’s because love is a choice. Oftentimes people say they “fell in love.” Now I won’t argue semantics here, but if one falls into love, that implies one can also fall out of love. Some people have said they are no longer in love. That’s because for them, love wasn’t a choice, but was rather a feeling or a whim.

Praise be to God that He has chosen to love us. How do we know this? He showed us on the cross. It wasn’t a feeling or a whim that held Jesus on the cross. Rather, it was God’s plan, His love, which held Him there for my sins and yours. If it had been a feeling or a whim, Jesus might have backed out when things got tough, right? We even know that His struggle was real, as the gospels tell us that Jesus asked if this “cup” could pass from Him but relinquished His will in favor of God’s. The Lord’s love was shown and made evident, though, as Jesus died for our sins.

Who do you love? Not who do you have feelings about or for, but who do you genuinely love? Because of Jesus’ love we are to love each other. This means that though we may let each other down, frustrate each other, or go through tough times, we can still love each other, because it is not based on a whim or a feeling but in response to Jesus’ love. Have you received Jesus’ love? If so, are you showing that love to others? If not, ask Him to help you do so.

Day 3

First Read 1 John 4:10-20

In today's passage two key words are repeated over and over again. Did you catch them? If not, read it again to see if you can figure out what those two words are. Got it? They are "abide" and "love" and their connection is strong. We know that we love because He first loved us according to verse 19. This means that for us to love Jesus back and for us to love others we must have first received and trusted in God's love. It's safe to say, then, that one cannot truly love in the real sense of the word if they have not received and experienced God's love. God Himself is love; that is how we can love others as the passage says.

But can we truly love someone simply by having received God's love? In other words, do I trust and believe in God and that's it; now I can love others perfectly the way God wanted me to? The answer is no. The second word that sticks out in this passage is ABIDE. Imagine putting a letter into an envelope and closing the envelope. The letter is abiding in the envelope, it is covered up by the envelope, and is completely enfolded inside the envelope. I want to abide in Jesus; I want to be covered up by Him on all sides and at all times. The only way that I can truly love those closest to me and those who may seem like enemies is if I abide in Christ, that is, if I am walking with and in tune with the Holy Spirit.

Are you abiding in Christ today, right now? Are you trying to love others on your own or with His love? Remember today's passage tells us if we hate our brother then we are a liar, because we can't both love God and hate our brother; those two situations oppose each other. Ask God today to help you abide in Him and love others. We cannot do this on our own. Only after knowing God and abiding in Him can we truly love others. Are you abiding in Christ today? Only He can love in and through us.

Day 4

First Read 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

In essence, Paul told the Corinthians that things such as prophecies, tongues, and knowledge will one day cease to be, as they will not be needed any longer. When the end comes only that which is needed will remain: faith, hope, and love, the greatest of these being love. God's love for us and our love in response to His are what matters. Love is the gift that never ends. When we get to heaven we will continue to love God and God will continue to love us. However, there will not be a need for prophesying, for example, because we will live in perfect harmony with the Father and all that will matter is God's love.

Think of everything that "matters" now! How much does it matter? Really matter? Are some things that we deem necessary or important really important or is it that it just seems that way? Scripture often reminds us that as God loves us we are in turn to love Him and others and that's what is really important. It's definitely not saying that other things like family, education, etc. are bad, but in the grand scheme of things walking with and loving God is what should rise to the top.

Where does walking and loving God fit for you? Many have said to always put God first. I would argue, don't. Instead, allow God to be everything to you no matter where you are. In this way, God is not part of a list of things that need to be checked off. He's not to be simply the first thing in our lives; He's to be our lives. He is with us morning, noon and night, He is all we truly need, though He has given us His blessings to enjoy and experience in this life. Are you walking with and following God? Is He your all? Why not make Him your all today and seek Him anew daily.

Day 5

First Read Psalm 31:1-8

Look at the true and heartfelt words of David in this psalm. We see just how David felt about the Lord and the truth he knew:

For you are my rock and my fortress - David knew that the Lord was all that he needed. Whether life was going well or if he was running from his enemies in a time of adversity, he knew God was that constant rock, dependable as no other thing or person could be. In our crazy world Jesus is our rock and our fortress, that which we can lean on to steady us and to set a firm foundation underneath our feet.

You are my strength - David knew he had no strength on his own and we don't either. It's easy to get down and feel defeated when we keep our eyes solely on the world and the things of this world. However, if we keep our eyes on Jesus, we experience Him as our true strength and joy.

You have redeemed me - Jesus is our ultimate redeemer and though David wrote these words many years before Jesus came to earth, David knew that trusting in God (putting his hope in Him) was what saved him. So when Jesus died on the cross for our sins He also died for those of David and others. Praise God that you and I have been redeemed, purchased by the blood of Jesus.

I trust in the Lord - Scripture tells us that some trust in chariots (or things or people), but we are to trust in the name of the Lord our God. Choosing to trust in Jesus is a choice and as we make this choice God is faithful to reward our trusting in Him as He offers peace and hope that only He can give.

I will be glad and rejoice in your mercy - David realized that God is merciful. We often don't think of what we really deserve (hell and eternity apart from God). In contrast to what we deserve, Jesus gave us what we don't deserve (salvation, eternity with Him, and abundant life). We can rejoice in His mercy and be glad.

Think of all of these words of truth that David penned. Choose today to follow and trust God no matter what you are facing. We can either choose to follow, walk with, and trust in Him or choose to try to do life on our own. I have tried the latter and it doesn't work, but trusting and hoping in God does. Will you trust and follow Him?

WEEK 55 PAUL'S WORK IN EPHEBUS-----Dennis Watson

What we read this week in Acts took place during the time of Paul's third missionary journey. The spread of the gospel continued and even took a huge leap as Paul left the sanctuary in Ephesus and went to the School of Tyrannus to begin to teach there. From there the gospel spread among the region even more to the gentiles. This week we will also look at Paul's farewell message to the elders of the churches of Ephesus. The gospel is powerful and resilient in the hands of people who are filled with the Holy Spirit and surrendered to God's plan to take it to the whole world.

Day 1

First Read Acts 18:24-19:7

It is very difficult to teach people who have not received the whole gospel. This was the case with a man named Apollos, but also with a group of disciples Paul came across in Ephesus on his third missionary journey. Apollos was teaching, but teaching only the part of Jesus that came up to and through the ministry of John the Baptist. Chuck Missler says that the Old Testament actually ended in Luke 16:16. He says that John the Baptist was the last Old Testament prophet. John told about the coming of Jesus. In his preaching and teaching, salvation was expected, but had not yet come. Apollos knew about coming events promised by John the Baptist regarding Jesus but he did not know the fulfillment. Two believers, a couple named Aquila and Priscilla, took him aside privately and taught him the full message of the gospel.

When Paul set out on his third missionary journey and arrived in Ephesus, he found a group of disciples like Apollos who only had John's message and baptism. Paul asked them about their baptism. He wanted to know if they had received the Holy Spirit. The pattern for today is that sinners hear the Word, they believe on Jesus Christ, they receive the Holy Spirit immediately upon their belief, and they are then baptized (see Acts 10:43-48). Therefore, it can be said that these believers were on the right side of Easter but on the wrong side of Pentecost. They were on the right side of pardon but on the wrong side of power. They were justified but not sanctified. Paul shared the whole gospel with them, baptized them, and after he laid hands on them they were filled with the Holy Spirit. They now had the power of the gospel, which is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life. Regarding the laying on of hands to receive the Holy spirit, Warren Wiersbe writes:

Why was it necessary for Paul to lay hands on these men before they could receive the Spirit? Didn't this contradict the experience of Peter recorded in Acts 10:44-48? Not if you keep in mind that this was a special group of men who would help form the nucleus of a great church in Ephesus. By using Paul to convey the gift of the Spirit, God affirmed Paul's apostolic authority and united the Ephesian church to the other churches as well as to the "mother church" in Jerusalem. When Peter and John laid hands on the believing Samaritans, it united them to the Jerusalem church and healed a breach between Jews and Samaritans that had existed for centuries. What God did through Paul for these twelve men was not normative for the church today. How do we know? Because it was not repeated. The people who were converted in Ephesus under Paul's ministry all received the gift of the Holy Spirit when they trusted the Savior. Paul makes this clear in Ephesians 1:13-14, and this is the pattern for us today.⁴

It is not enough to just be forgiven. The whole gospel includes the presence and power of God's Holy Spirit who empowers believers to live and make disciples. Thank the Lord for the whole gospel, including the indwelling Holy spirit!

⁴Bible Exposition Commentary (BE Series) - New Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – New Testament, Volume 1.

Day 2

First Read Acts 19:8-12

Paul was determined to preach and teach the message of the gospel. For three months he had been teaching in the synagogue, seeking to persuade Jews regarding the gospel message. However, they were not only unresponsive, but also began to malign the followers of “the Way.” It was this that caused Paul to leave his teaching in the synagogue and turn to a place called the School of Tyrannus. This was a school in Ephesus which was a public building or lecture hall. During the early afternoon Paul would teach and present the message of the gospel, at a time when people would normally be eating and napping. It was during this time that the gospel spread to all the people of the province of Asia. From this base of operation churches all over the region were started, perhaps even the seven churches of Revelation 2-3. These churches came into existence either through Paul’s own labors or through the labor of those who heard his teaching, became believers, and went out from there to teach and preach, as well.

The rejection by the Jews caused the gospel message to be preached to the gentiles outside the synagogue. As a result, the message spread throughout the region. Paul turned away from the synagogue and described the experience that opened up in Ephesus. Here are his words describing what had taken place:

But I will tarry in Ephesus until Pentecost. ⁹ For a great and effective door has opened to me, and there are many adversaries. 1 Corinthians 16:8-9 (NKJV)

When the message is rejected in one place it will surely be accepted in another. Don’t be discouraged when people do not receive your witness. Henry Blackaby puts it this way, “Look to see where God is at work and join Him.”

Keep presenting the truth of the gospel. Some will reject it, but others will hear and gladly receive. Be encouraged and keep going!

Day 3

First Read Acts 20:17-27

In Paul's travels on his third mission trip visiting and strengthening the churches, he turned his attention to Jerusalem. In this passage, we see that he decided to return to Jerusalem. On his way he sent word to the elders of the church at Ephesus to meet him in Miletus. In the New Testament the term elders is used to describe the shepherds of the congregations. Elder, bishop, and pastor are synonymous in this context. Over the next two days we will look at the three parts of Paul's farewell message to these leaders. the first two parts today and third part tomorrow.

The first part of his farewell message was a review of the past. In verses 18-21 he shared with the elders his motive for ministry, his manner of ministry, and the message of his ministry. His motive was in "serving the Lord." That was what kept him going. This was his passion—to serve the Lord. He was not in it to make money, to enjoy an easy life, or make a name for himself. His manner was to live a life that anyone could inspect. He lived above reproach. His was a ministry characterized by humility. Paul was not a religious celebrity wanting others to serve him. He faced the work of the gospel with confidence and did what needed to be done to get the message of the gospel to people.

In verse 22 he made the switch from his review of the past to the present. He bared his heart to the assembled elders regarding what would most likely happen to him as he went to Jerusalem. He knew from the Holy Spirit that chains and tribulations awaited him, but he said that "*none of these things move me.*" He just wanted to finish his task well and "*testify to the gospel of the grace of God.*" He told the elders that this was most likely the last time he would see them. Because of his persistence to preach the gospel he was "*innocent of the blood of all men.*" He was also confident that as he came to the end of his life and ministry that he had preached the "*whole counsel of God.*" He knew that in the past he had been faithful and would continue in the present until he had finished the course set out for him.

Paul was determined to finish well! Let us all make the same determination to finish sharing boldly the good news of Jesus Christ.

Day 4

First Read Acts 20:28-38

Yesterday we looked at the first two parts of Paul's farewell address to the elders of the Ephesus churches. The first was his review of the past. The second was his testimony of the present. Today we will look at the verses that deal with a warning about the future. His warning was for the elders to "take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which He purchased with His own blood." Warren Wiersbe speaks regarding the importance of the church to God:

The church is important to God the Father because His name is on it—"the church of God." It is important to the Son because He shed His blood for it; and it is important to the Holy Spirit because He is calling and equipping people to minister to the church. It is a serious thing to be a spiritual leader in the church of the living God.⁵

Paul warned them about the dangers around them. There were wolves who would ravage the church. These are those who come and teach lies and counterfeit the truth. The goal is to attack the sheep and lead them astray and even destroy them. Pastors need to instruct the people properly so that they can be safe and secure when these wolves come.

There were and are also dangers that come from within the church. These are people who are overly ambitious for position and power. These people want to gain attention and recognition for themselves and they literally suck the life out of the church.

Then he warned about the danger within us, "take heed unto yourselves." Paul told them that there are five sins that are especially destructive to the church body. In verse 31 he spoke of carelessness and warned them to remember how he had told "everyone night and day for three years." We need to be spiritually responsible and not careless.

He warned of shallowness in verse 32 and told them to build themselves up with the Word of God. We cannot effectively build His church if we are not regularly being built up by His Spirit and His Word.

In verse 33 he warned of covetousness. Paul told them he did not covet anyone's silver, gold, or clothing. He warned against coveting what the people in the church had.

⁵Bible Exposition Commentary (BE Series) - New Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – New Testament, Volume 1.

He warned them against being idle or lazy (verse 34). He reminded them that he had worked with his own hands to provide for his needs and the needs of those with him. It is not wrong for an elder, pastor or Christian worker to receive an income for his work, but he should definitely work!

Lastly, he warned them against selfishness. They were to work to provide for their own needs and to give to others who had a need.

To be a pastor, elder, or any other Christian leader is a great privilege, but it is also a great responsibility. Those called to serve need to be careful to live as examples to those around them, always above reproach. Are you serving Him in His church? If so, do it faithfully.

Day 5

First Read Isaiah 45:21-22

Day five each week is the time we look at a passage from the Psalms or one of the prophets to see how they connect to Jesus or our salvation.

Do people worship idols today? Well, according to the Bible an idol is something or someone worshipped other than God. Idolatry is not only an ancient thing, but it is modern, too. Just recently it has occurred to me that in the US we have transferred our worship gathering from the church house to the stadium or coliseum. There, as many as 100,000 people gather to sing, cheer, and shout about their team. Maybe yours is not a sports team but a singer or TV or movie personality. We mourn the death of famous people as though they had done something great like save us from a dreaded disease or deadly attack.

The passage in Isaiah we look at today is a challenge, first of all to idol worshippers to abandon their idols and then a look at the true savior. The verses that lead up to today's passage are about God raising up and using a Persian King by the name of Cyrus. No idol can do such a thing. God prophesied about Cyrus and called him his "anointed" a century before he was even born. Can an idol do such? Of course not! Idols are not only powerless, but the "gods" they represent do not even exist. Idols are non-existent, yet people still worship them, considering them to be gods when they are not.

Idols are imaginary and impotent, but the one true God is powerful, just, and mighty to save. There is no other God but the God who has revealed Himself in history and then again in history through Jesus Christ, God's Son and God's anointed. Since there are no other gods and no idols, verse 22 is an appeal to look to God for salvation. That is to Jesus Christ. He is God in the flesh. We now know that the Savior is Jesus. Have you looked to Him? If not, now is the time.

WEEK 56 A New Creation -----Chris Watson

We are a new creation. Through God we have been made new and nothing can take that away. If we are made “new,” then we know that we were once “old” and needed the newness only Christ could bring. A well-known song says, “Now I’m not who I used to be.” This is it! A new creation is what this song sings of. How has God changed you? How has He made you new?

Day 1

First Read 2 Corinthians 5:11-15

The Greek word for compel in verse 14 is *anagkázō* and it means to “do so with urgency” or with a “pressing necessity.” Verse 15 goes on to say that we should no longer live for ourselves but we should live for the One who died and rose again. Putting this together, then, Paul was saying that it is Christ and His love that compelled him, Paul, to do what he did. It was not for himself, so that he could boast or so he could make himself or others look good. Rather, everything he did was because Christ’s love “compelled” him.

What does Christ’s love compel you to do? Think of this past week. What has Christ’s love compelled you to do; that is, what have you felt an urgency and necessity to do? As for me, I have been compelled to spend time with God because I know that I need it. Sometimes, however, it is not Christ’s love but other things that compel me. At other times I know I should be compelled by Christ’s love but I am compelled instead by my selfish motives or compelled to do nothing. As we have said before, motivation is the “why” and the “for whom” behind what I do.

So what compels you today? What compels you to love? What compels you to give? What compels you to serve? If it is anything other than Christ and His love, repent and ask Him to change your heart. We all know that if we serve based on something other than God’s love we get burnt out and often become angry and frustrated. But if God is our greater gift and our treasure, then our heart and motives are right. Take some time today to ask God to make your heart right and your actions and motives to be compelled by Him. And if you are currently involved in something where your compelling comes from something or someone else, give it to Him.

Day 2

First Read 2 Corinthians 5:16-17

Scripture reminds us that we have been saved, reconciled to God. Today's scripture also reminds us that in Christ we are a new creation and old things have passed and all things have been made new. In Christ, we are no longer slaves to our old ways and a life of darkness and turmoil, but slaves to Christ. Our hearts have literally been changed, along with our attitudes, thoughts, and minds.

Now, if you are like Paul, you will still struggle with the temptation to go back to the "old" self. Paul even told us that the things that he should be doing he was not and that which he shouldn't be doing he was. In other words, our sinful nature tries to creep back in, as we do live in a fallen world and our "default" setting is sin, the ways of the world, and the ways of the enemy. Though we need to be reminded often that in Christ we are a new creation, we don't have to live that old life, with the thoughts and actions we used to have before Christ entered and changed us.

Our part is yielding to the new life in Christ that we have. **1 Timothy 4:8** says, *"For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come."* When we trust in Jesus, we get all of Jesus. However, we must yield to Him. Think of yielding. In driving we are to yield to oncoming traffic, meaning if oncoming traffic is coming and we are properly "yielding," we let traffic go and we fall in afterwards. This is what it means to yield to Jesus or the Holy Spirit. We wait for His leading and direction, never going in front of Him or doing it on our own because we are a new creation and we no longer do things the "old" way.

How has God made you a new creation? How have you seen Him take your old way of thinking and actions and tune those to His way of thinking and His actions? Thank Him today that you are a new creation and walk in that new life that has been given to you by Him.

Day 3

First Read 2 Corinthians 5:18-20

The word “reconciled” is used five times in just these three verses. Reconciliation at its most basic means to bring together or bring back together two people who were once against each other. **Romans 5:10** says, “*For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.*” Also **Colossians 1:21** says, “*And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled.*” In other words, before we placed our faith in Jesus we were literally enemies of God. Now we may not like to think of it like this but it is true; scripture says so. Therefore, there are two types of people in this world when it comes to a relationship with God and those are friends of God or enemies of God. John 15 reminds us that as believers we are friends of God.

How can we be friends of God? Verse 18 tells us this is accomplished through Christ Jesus, by placing our faith in what He has done for us, allowing Him to change our whole lives. However, we are not to just trust in Jesus, walk in and with Him, and then keep it to ourselves. Reread verse 20 of today’s passage. We read the word “ambassador” again. An ambassador is one who acts as a representative. In other words, we are on God’s team, working for God, so we should be sharing our faith and telling others about their need for Christ, since we are representing Christ. Verse 20 gives us the picture that we are to be telling everyone we see or know about Jesus and our relationship with Him and asking them whether or not they have that relationship, too. If they do not, we are to tell them how they can and ask them if they would like to have what we have, a hope for the future and a relationship with God now.

This begs the question, who are we sharing with? Recount your last week for a moment; did you find yourself sharing your faith? Convicting question, right? It is for me, too. There are many reasons we may not share with others, including “fear” or just being “me” focused, distracted by all that is going on in our own lives. Today, really ask God to show you someone who needs to hear the story of your faith. Ask Him to help you see such opportunities. Years ago I changed my prayer from, “God, give me opportunities to share my faith” to “God, help me see the opportunities,” as I became convinced they were all around me but I was missing them because of my focus on everything that kept me so busy. Who do you need to share with today, as Christ’s ambassador? Pray and ask God to open your eyes and help you to slow down to seek God and these opportunities. Pray and ask God if He might have you be on mission in Canada, Baltimore, China, or Canada? The question is not should we go but rather when and

how. If you are physically unable to go on a mission trip, ask Him how you can be a part of helping someone else go.

Day 4

First Read 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2

Reread verse 21 again! This is an incredible verse that reminds us what God has done. God has “imputed” His righteousness on our behalf. The word imputation simply means “to charge to one’s account, to impute.” This helps us understand verse 21 when it says, “*He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God.*” God has placed upon us His righteousness, something that we could not do on our own.

“To impute means to reckon to someone the blessing, curse, debt, etc., of another. Adam’s sin is imputed to all people (Rom. 5:12-21). Therefore, we are effectively all guilty before God. Our sins were put upon, imputed, to Jesus on the cross where He became sin on our behalf (2 Cor. 5:21) and died with them (Isaiah 53:4-6). Therefore, our sins are forgiven. Understanding imputation is very important. Imputation is the means of our salvation. Our sins were put upon, imputed, to Jesus on the cross. Our sins were “given” to Jesus. When He died on the cross, our sins, in a sense, died with Him. The righteousness that was His through His perfect obedience to the Father in His complete obedience to the Law is imputed--given to us. In short, our sins were given to Jesus. His righteousness was given to us. Technically speaking, our sins were imputed to Jesus. His righteousness was imputed to us. Sin is breaking the law of God (1 John 3:4)--hence the legal aspect. Sin is a legal debt. **Matt. 6:12**, *‘And forgive us our debts (opheilema), as we also have forgiven our debtors.’* The parallel in Luke 11:4 says, *“And forgive us our sins (hamartia) . . .”* Jesus equates sin with debt. So, legal debts can be transferred which is why Jesus bore our sins in His body on the cross (1 Peter 2:24). And, because of the instrument of faith, we are justified (a legal standing before the Law) and have a righteousness that’s not our own (Phil. 3:9). His righteousness is reckoned to our account (justification).”⁶

What an exchange that is. God took our sin and gave His grace instead. God took our filth and made us clean. God took our hate and gave us love. God took our anger and gave us love. We could go on and on and on concerning the exchanges that God has given us. Praise be to God for what He has done and continues to do for us.

⁶<https://carm.org/dictionary-impute>

Day 5

First Read Psalm 31:9-16

Like David, Jesus was often persecuted by His enemies. However, David often found himself in some of his own trouble. Verse 10 tells us that his strength was failing because of his iniquities (sin). David was feeling the weight of both his own sins and the sins of others as many sought to take his life. In the end, David knew that his hope was in the Lord.

Verse 14 tells us that though he was grieving, though he may have had to run for his life, and though his enemies were ever after him, that his trust was ultimately in the Lord. As of this writing, this Sunday's message will look at the crucifixion and the criminals and just what Jesus went through. Yet, the whole time He didn't say a word, but He trusted in God, alone.

We all face times of struggle, difficulties, and heartache. We have the choice to be bitter and angry or to give it all to the Lord and trust in Him. That's not to say we won't hurt or have to work through the situation and the hurt. But in all of it we can trust that God is in control. In fact, as of this writing we are right at six months from the Presidential election. Ultimately, my hope isn't in any candidate now, past, or future. The only hope we have is that which David had and that is our hope in God and in God alone. We are to be obedient, follow God, listen to Him, and trust in His plans.

What about you? In whom or what is your trust today? Have you put it in other things, including yourself? Do you feel overwhelmed, as though your enemies are taking you over or your sin is overbearing? Place it at Jesus' feet. He is our hope, the One in whom we trust.

WEEK 57 GOD LOVES A CHEERFUL GIVER-----Dennis Watson

Jesus said, *"It is more blessed to give than to receive"* (Acts 20:35). I believe that to be true, so I like Paul, teach about giving. This week we will see that Paul taught and encouraged the Corinthian believers to be givers. He taught them that giving was a blessing and they could experience great joy and hilarity in giving. He also taught that giving blessed everyone and that giving would extend that blessing throughout eternity.

Day 1

First Read 2 Corinthians 9:1-9

The story is told that when Alexander the Great had conquered the world and returned to Greece, he looked up his old teacher, Aristotle, to tell him all that had happened. When he found Aristotle, he was taking a bath. Alexander stood in the doorway and told Aristotle what had happened. Then he said, "Now I am prepared to give you anything in the world that you want. What do you want?" Aristotle looked up and replied, "I want you to get out of my light!" May I say to you, that's all any of us do -- we cast a shadow. But there is no shadow in God at all.⁷

James 1:17 tells us that every good gift of giving and every perfect gift comes from God who is light and has no darkness or shadows.

The law of sowing and reaping is definitely built into nature. The farmer who goes out with his seeds and sows them thoroughly will in turn and in time reap a harvest. If he refuses to sow his seed out of greed, there will be no harvest. Now if you put this together with the first paragraph, you come up with the concept being taught in this passage of scripture. God gives us the stuff we have, but to really experience the blessings and benefits of it all we must give with great expectation.

The believers in Jerusalem were struggling due to persecution. For that reason they were poor and going without even the daily necessities. The gospel had spread to the surrounding gentile region where churches had sprung up and the people were being blessed. Paul encouraged the church at Corinth to supply the offering they had previously promised. He sought to motivate them to come through with what they had promised.

Consider the motivation he was giving. He told them to give bountifully and, in doing so, they would reap bountifully. He also told them to give with a heart that was motivated to bless others as they had been blessed.

⁷Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

He exhorted them to give cheerfully or hilariously. Then he helped them to see the blessings. This is spelled out in a very encouraging way in verse 8, *“And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work.”*

Look at those phrases—*“all grace abound,” “always having,” “all sufficiency,” “all things,” and “an abundance.”* He is encouraging them from both sides—the lead up and the outcome. The lead up is a heart that is full and aware of God’s blessings to give joyfully. The outcome is to see God’s blessings overflow in so many ways.

There is an old saying, *“You cannot out give God.”* I will add something to that. Just enjoy trying! Ask the Lord for the grace to be a bountiful, cheerful, and expectant giver.

Day 2

First Read 2 Corinthians 9:10-12

Paul continued his encouragement of the Corinthian believers to be givers. In his words about “seed for the sower and bread for food,” our thinking turns to Isaiah,

"For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, And do not return there, But water the earth, And make it bring forth and bud, That it may give seed to the sower And bread to the eater, 11 So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it. Isaiah 55:10-11 (NKJV)

For the believer there is no distinction between sacred and secular. In Isaiah, “seed” and “bread” refer to both the Word of God and the harvest in the field. Whatever we use, give, or dispense, whether it be money, possessions, or the Word of God, they all go out and return bringing about a harvest. He was telling them that all we do in serving the Lord will have a fruit-producing impact. In particular, their provision in this offering would not only provide for those with physical needs, but would also result in more and more people giving thanks to God and worshipping Him. This becomes a cycle. When you give, you are blessed and you want to give more. When you give more, more people are blessed. When more people are blessed, they give thanks and worship. The outcome is the fruits of righteousness. This depicts people who are blessed and rejoicing in the blessings and they share with others and see God bless even more. This is a glorious celebration of cheerful givers experiencing the abounding grace of God!

I hope you see what Paul did with these Corinthian believers. He invited them to experience the blessing of being an instrument of God’s blessings. You see, everything He gives us is not intended to end up with us. We are to share the blessings and enjoy the fruit of those blessings as we see others enjoy the fruit also.

One more time—you cannot outgive God. But give it a try, anyway!

Day 3

First Read Romans 6:23

In the middle devotion each week we look to see how the week's devotions connect to Jesus and the gospel message. Many times, as is the case this week, it is just one verse. This verse is loaded. We have been looking this week at the impact of true giving. Many people are impacted in a positive way when a person gives with the true spirit of biblical giving. Consider just a few connections.

First look at **John 12:24** where Jesus spoke of His coming death, *"Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain."* Jesus used the sowing idea to show that one grain of wheat produces a huge amount of grain when it gives up its life.

Now look at Paul's words in **1 Corinthians 15:20**, *"But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."* The term "firstfruits" tells us that He is the first of many more to come. In giving Himself to die Jesus multiplied His offspring exponentially.

Lastly look at **Romans 5:17**, *"For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ."* The wages or result of Adam's sin passed to all men until Jesus, God's Son, came to live among us. He was the God-man; fully God and fully man. However, He was not born in the line of the man but of the seed of the woman. He was the only one qualified to bring a new lineage or family line. So through Jesus Christ the new comes. Therefore, in Christ a person becomes new by His grace.

Now look at Romans 3:23. Wages is what we earn or deserve. In the case of our sin, the wages are death. However, because Jesus gave Himself to die for our sin and in our place, we receive the gift of eternal life.

I am thankful for God and His grace giving! Look at the impact that grace giving has had and will continue to have. Look at the thanksgiving that just flows and will continue until Jesus returns because He gave! And one more verse; I love this one. **Hebrews 12:2** speaks of Jesus and says of Him, *"who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."* What was the joy? It was the joy of doing His Father's will in giving His life. Jesus was a cheerful giver with fruit that continues today!

Give thanks to the Lord for the blessing that Jesus' gift continues to bring!

Day 4

First Read 2 Corinthians 9:13-15

“The gift that keeps on giving.” That is an ad slogan that was first used or at least first trademarked to be used for commercial purposes in 1925. It was used for the first ever “talking machine.” This was also known as the phonograph. Now it needs to be said that these later were known as record players and of course today most recordings are done digitally. The point we want to look at is the slogan, “The gift that keeps on giving.” That first trademark has been canceled and the slogan has been used by many commercial entities. However, Jesus and His gospel is truly the gift that keeps on giving. In today’s passage, Paul told the Corinthians that their giving would cause the gospel to do what it does—spread and keep on giving the greatest gift of all—salvation. Salvation really does keep on giving for eternity. Giving results in the spread of the gospel. I want to share a wonderful story of giving that resulted in the printing of scripture and its long term impact. This comes from Chuck Missler’s notes on Acts.

In 1835, The Bible Society published 100 copies of the Gospel of Luke in Maori. In 1836, missionaries gave one to a young Maori girl, Tarore, at a mission school near Matamata. She read it to her father, the chief of the Waikato tribe. She kept her treasured copy under her pillow when she slept.

Under threat of a neighboring warring Rotorua tribe, the mission school was in the process of relocating to Tauranga. On October 19, 1836, at the Wairere Falls, a raiding party killed the 12-year old girl, and took the treasured object under her pillow.

Later, unable to read, the Rotorua chief discarded it until a slave boy who had learned to read, revealed its contents to the fascinated listeners. The chief was convicted by its content and resolved to become a Christian. The Rotorua chief resolved to seek out the father of the murdered girl and beg for his forgiveness.

When finally confronting the father, the chief of the Waikato tribe—and risking the customary tribal response of revenge—the father of the murdered girl forgave him, and thus began a peaceful relationship between the two previously warring tribes!

(This true story is distributed to school children as part of their Maori heritage.)

A young girl murdered... A devastated father refusing to seek revenge... A murderer transformed through the Gospel he stole from his victim... Then forgiveness given and peace achieved!

The story of this young Maori girl and her copy of the Gospel of Luke became the key to the conversion of many Maori tribes. When missionaries visited both the North and South Islands, they discovered that many of the Maori tribes had already been converted to Christ due to the story of Tarore and her copy of the Gospel of Luke making its rounds...On February 6, 1840, the nation of New Zealand was born by the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi with the Maori tribes.

While primarily dealing with land rights and other issues, this foundational document obligates the Crown of the United Kingdom to safeguard and protect the Maori's rights of worship.

Since a significant portion of the Maori tribes had previously been converted to Christianity, the government is legally committed to protect Christianity in New Zealand. There are Bibles in schools, home schooling is encouraged, and many Christian schools receive significant government support. Thank the Lord that the gospel really is the gift that keeps on giving. You also give so the gospel will continue to bless and bring rejoicing and thanksgiving.

DAY 5

First Read Isaiah 53:9

Day five each week is the time we look at a passage from the Psalms or one of the prophets to see how they connect to Jesus or our salvation.

Isaiah 53:9 tells us that Jesus was designated for burial with the wicked but in God's plan He had another location for His short-term burial. After all, Jesus needed the tomb for just a few days. It could have been the first and only case of rent-a-tomb. Do you think Joseph of Arimathea had any idea he was fulfilling prophecy when he asked for the body of Jesus and then laid it in his own tomb? I think he was just doing what he believed was the right thing to do. Do you think he believed Jesus was going to vacate the tomb in just a few days? I believe that Jesus had arranged this with Joseph before His crucifixion. I believe the God had Joseph in the right place at the right time. Joseph of Arimathea was a secret believer inside the 71-member Sanhedrin. God had placed him there as He had Esther, *"for such a time as this."*

Hundreds of years before His birth God had Isaiah write that Jesus would be killed with criminals and was destined to be buried with them, but instead He would be buried among the rich. The dots connect. A rich man provided his own tomb for Jesus to be buried in. Joseph of Arimathea was blessed to be in on God's plan. He was willing and ready and when the time came he had this time, this place, and these people, and God worked mightily through him.

God is still at work. He has placed you in this time, this place, and among this group of people. Join God in what He is up to. Don't miss out on the experience of being gloriously used of God.

WEEK 58 A Gift of Righteousness-----Chris Watson

We have no righteousness (goodness) of our own, which is why we need Jesus. If we could “produce” our own goodness we would not need God, but we just can’t do it. Jesus became our righteousness and placed it on us. It was a gift and, like all gifts, must be rejected or received.

Day 1

First Read Romans 3:9-20

You and I are evil. There, I said it! However, I am only agreeing with what the Bible confirms. Verse 10 says there is no one who is righteous; therefore, we must be unrighteous, which means we are evil, we are all under sin. “The expression ‘all are under sin’ must be taken in a spiritual sense; that is to say, not as men appear in their own eyes or in those of others, but as they stand before God. They all are under sin, those who are manifest transgressors in the eyes of men, as well as those who appear righteous in their own sight and before others. Those who perform outwardly good works do them from fear of punishment of love of gain and glory, or otherwise from pleasure in certain object, but not from a willing and ready mind. In this way man exercises himself continually in good works outwardly, but inwardly he is totally immersed in sinful desires and evil lusts, which are opposed to good works. Such outward good works are doubly evil; first, because they do not flow from a good will and so are sinful (in themselves), and again, because with incredible arrogance they are upheld and defended as good. If the will of men is not sanctified by the grace of God, which He has promised and imparts to those who believe in Christ, so that freely and joyously and solely to please God in doing His will they do the works demanded by the Law, with full freedom from fear of punishment and selfish love for the act, they always are under sin.”⁸

This quote reminds us of our motivation; that is, if there is any good in us it is because of God. We have no goodness or righteousness of our own. Verse 20 reminds us that nothing that we do in and of ourselves (flesh) will be justified in God’s sight but rather the law helps us see and understand sin.

We must be reminded that apart from Christ we are bad, evil, disobedient, unloving, and hateful people. That’s right! Both you and I. But with Christ in us, this all changes, not because of us, but because of Him. Are you reminded today that you are not good enough to approach God’s throne?

⁸Commentary on Romans, Martin Luther. Translated by J. Theodore Mueller

I am. But rather than thinking on our sin, think on what God has done for us. As we place our faith in Him we are then considered righteous, not because of our works, but because of His!

Day 2

First Read Romans 3:21-24

“St. Augustine writes in the ninth chapter of his book Concerning the Spirit and the Letter; ‘He does not speak of the righteousness of God, by which God is righteous, but of that with which He clothes a person when He justifies the ungodly.’ Again in the eleventh chapter he comments, ‘But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested that is, God imparts it to the believer by the Spirit of grace without the work of the Law, or without the help of the Law. Through the Law God opens man’s eyes so that he sees his helplessness and by faith takes refuge to His mercy and so is healed.’ The Apostle therefore does not describe the righteousness of God, by which He is essentially righteous, by the righteousness (by which a sinner is justified), which they can obtain only by faith in Christ.”⁹ In essence the righteousness of Jesus is the only thing that can make us right before a holy God, when we put our faith in Him and what He has done for us.

St Augustine goes on to say in the thirteenth chapter of his book Concerning the Spirit and the Letter; “What the law of works commands with threatening, that the Law of faith accomplished through faith”. In the nineteenth chapter he remarks; “The Law was given, in order that we might seek after grace. Grace was given, in order that we might fulfill the Law. It was not the fault of the Law that it was not fulfilled, but the fault man’s carnal mind. This guilt the Law must make manifest, in order that we may be healed by divine grace.”¹⁰

In essence, the law was meant to show us our sin and our need for Christ. We are justified freely and, while it doesn’t cost us anything, it cost Christ everything. In return God wants our hearts, minds, everything we are.

Praise God that He has given us His grace. And though “all” are sinners and fall short of God’s glory, God’s love and grace is open to all who will receive and put their trust in Him. Have you put your trust in Him? Are you following Him? Spend some time today thanking Him for His grace and love and that He has saved you!

⁹ Commentary on Romans, Martin Luther.

¹⁰ Commentary on Romans, Martin Luther.

Day 3

First Read Romans 3:25-26

“On the great Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16) the high priest presented before Jehovah two goats: one was slain, and its blood brought by the high priest into the tabernacle, through this holy place, and past the second veil into the holy of holies. There the high priest sprinkled the blood upon “the mercy-seat” (the covering of the ark of the covenant, where the Shekinah glory of God’s presence was above the cherubim), and also before the mercy-seat, seven times. This was the blood of the goat upon which the lot fell “for Jehovah”; therefore we have here first the holy and righteous claims of the throne of God as to sin completely met. The golden covering of the ark was called the “mercy seat.” In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, this golden covering of the ark is always called by the Greek word, *hilasterion*, which we find translated “propitiation” here in verse 25 and ‘mercy seat’ in the only other New Testament occurrence of the word, Hebrews 9:5.”¹¹

Propitiation is the removal of wrath, guilt, and death based on the gift of Jesus’ blood. When Jesus died, He died for all the sins of the world. In verse 25 it says God, “*passed over the sins previously committed.*” Does this mean all those who committed sins prior to Jesus’ death on the cross get a free pass? Of course not. Even in the Old Testament we know that the sins of many cost others their lives. Not only that but sin cost them, like us, their relationships with God. Only the blood of Jesus could cover that sin. So how was one made right before Jesus’ blood? By trusting and believing in God. We will look at this next week with Abraham, so I won’t spend much time on it here. However, **Romans 4:3** says, “*Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.*” “Believed God” meant Abraham trusted God and his trust was made evident by his following and obeying. We see others like Moses and Abraham listed in Hebrews 11 as the writer spoke of “their faith.” It wasn’t their faith that saved them but God did, their faith was the avenue in which they were made right with God. The same is true for us. It is not our faith that saves us, God does that and did that at the cross. We receive that salvation personally and are assured eternal life when we put our faith in Him.

Thank God today that you were made right before Him when you trusted in Jesus’ blood to forgive you of your sins. Also spend some time considering the elaborate and incredible plan that God put into place to save us.

¹¹Romans, Verse by Verse, William R. Newell

Day 4

First Read Romans 3:27-31

Many of the “religious leaders” in Jesus’ time, and before, boasted in keeping the law. You might remember how the Pharisees would pray loud prayers to make themselves look good or others would make sure that everyone else knew how they were obeying the law. Many equated obeying the law with knowing God, when in reality they missed the mark.

We don’t follow God’s Word in hopes that we will know God (salvation). Rather, we follow God’s Word and heart because we do know God, that is, we have put our faith in Him (verse 28). We are justified by putting our faith in Jesus and because we have put our faith in Jesus, we then follow Him. In fact, we are to follow God with all we have.

When I follow God and His Word I can’t boast in what I have done. Rather I boast in what God has done, both on the cross and in me. It is not me doing it, as my nature is evil and I do not naturally desire to follow God. Yet when we are a new creation and God is in us, He works on our hearts, changes our desires, and we obey Him and His Word because we follow Him.

For the Jews of that time and for many today the philosophy goes, “I keep God’s Word and commandments, therefore I am saved.” However, scripture confirms that I am saved when I put my faith in Jesus and what He did for me on the cross. From that point I then keep His Word and commandments not because I want to be saved but because I am saved. These are two different things. One says I hope to be saved by following God’s Word and commandments and the other says I am saved, therefore I desire to follow God and His commandments.

Where are you? Are you living out of the “law” or out of faith? One is very constraining and the other is very freeing. Ask the Lord today which way you are living.

Day 5

First Read Isaiah 52:14-15

Today is our Old Testament passage that prophesies about Jesus. We see that in Isaiah, written some 700 years before Jesus, we are told that He will be marred and disfigured beyond that of any man. If you saw the Passion of the Christ movie, particularly, or any movie depicting the death of Jesus then you know just how cruel and gory it was. In fact, the American Medical Association says, "Due to the pain endured by the weight of the body hanging from the nails, which damage the medial nerves and tear at the tarsals, the respiratory torture, the cramping, the pleural effusions, concluded that 'death by crucifixion was in every sense of the word excruciating.'"¹² In other words the torture and beating that Jesus took was immense, so we may understand a little better as to why His appearance was disfigured so much more than that of any man.

Verse 15 reminds us that Jesus' blood will cover many nations. *"After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'"* **Revelation 7:9-10.** Jesus' blood is not just for you and me. It is certainly not just for Americans but for the whole world, for anyone who would trust and put their faith in Him. This is just one reason we need to tell the truth to others, to convey God's love across the street and around the world.

The middle half of verse 15 reminds us of God's divinity. Jesus is the King of Kings. At the end of time every knee will bow down and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. Remember that God raises up kings and tears them down, and at the end of time He will be the only King standing. Thank God for His Kingdom and His incredible plan and that, if you have put your faith and trusted Him as Savior, you are a part of His plan.

¹²On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ," Journal of the American Medical Association, March 21, 1986

WEEK 59 ABRAHAM: FATHER TO ALL BY FAITH-----Dennis Watson

This week we look at a group of passages that connect saving faith all the way back to Abraham. Paul calls him the father of us all who have faith. We will see this week that faith in the Bible connects the person of faith to God and His promises. Abraham was the first. We will see that although he lived long before Jesus and did not even know that name, his faith was in the saving work of God to deliver. Enjoy the week!

Day 1

First Read Romans 4:1-5

It is tempting to think that keeping the law is the way to be right with God and thus earn your way into heaven. However, the law does not make a person right with God (righteous) and will not get you into heaven. Instead, the law makes us aware of our sinfulness and our inability to keep the law. In **Romans 3:23** Paul wrote, *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* In chapter 4 he sought to help us understand what it is that makes a person right with God.

Abraham lived 400 years before the law and the Ten Commandments were given. It is first written in **Genesis 15:6** about Abraham, *“And he believed in the Lord, and He counted it to him for righteousness.”* Believe means to say “Amen.” Abraham said “Amen” to God, trusted Him, and did what He said to do. Abraham leaned on the promises of God and lived accordingly.

Like all of us, Abraham’s greatest need was righteousness. To be righteous is to be in right standing with God. Our problem is that we are sinners, which means our greatest need is to be made righteous. How is a person made righteous? ‘Counted’ in Genesis 15:6 and ‘accounted’ in Romans 4:3 both signify the idea of applying to someone’s account something that was not earned. The word “impute,” meaning to put something on an account, is another word that is often used. When God told Abraham to leave his homeland he obeyed. He trusted in God’s promise and lived accordingly. In following God’s promises and Word, Abraham was placing his faith in Jesus way in advance of Christ’s coming. Jesus died for our sins. To believe in Him is to be made righteous. When we believe God’s promises and trust Him He puts righteousness on our account!

J. Vernon McGee says of Paul writing in chapter 3 of Romans, “There is concord and agreement between the law and the gospel. Although they represent two diametrically opposed systems, neither contradicts nor con-

flicts with the other. And they are not mutually exclusive. Even under the Law and before the Law, faith was God's sole requirement. Abraham, before the Law, was justified by faith."¹³

Give thanks that righteousness, as with salvation, is a free gift, a gift which is not earned but is given to those who believe God and trust in His work and promises.

Day 2

First Read Romans 4:6-12

Paul used Abraham as an example of what he was talking about, but we see in these passages that Abraham was more than a mere example. We will see this momentarily. Paul illustrated his point with David, as well. Abraham lived four hundred years before the law was given and he was declared righteous before circumcision was given, as well. David lived under the law but even he spoke of sin forgiven and sin not imputed or applied to a person of faith's account. In legal terminology the idea of expungement comes to mind. This is the removal of a crime from a person's record. Sin is not imputed to the person of faith. His sin has been removed forever. We live much later than the law, circumcision, and the historical event of the crucifixion. But here is something really important to remember. Which of your sins were in the future when Jesus died for them on the cross? All of them! Which ones did He expunge from your record? All of them! Amazing Grace for sure! The person who has trusted in the Lord is blessed to know that his sin will never ever again be placed on his account!

Paul returned again in these passages to Abraham. We know that Abraham was the father of the Jewish people. However, Paul wrote here that he was also the father of all who believe. Before there was the law, before there was circumcision, and before Abraham took to himself the sign of circumcision he was justified by faith. He was the father of the Jewish people by birth but even more significantly, he became the father of all who come to God by faith apart from law and any other signs. Abraham simply believed God. That's all.

The old kid's song says, "Father Abraham had many sons and many sons had father Abraham and I am one of them and so are you, so let's just praise the Lord."

Everyone who has faith in God's plan through Jesus has been made a descendant of Abraham! Give thanks for God's incredible plan.

¹³Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

Day 3

First Read Roman 4:13-17

In the middle devotion each week we look to see how the week's devotions connect to Jesus and the gospel message. How does this passage connect to the gospel?

The biblical historical account of God's saving plan is the overall theme of the Bible. He delivers. The law was given not to save us or make us right with God because no one can keep the law. Abraham was made right with God by believing God's promise. Remember the law was given some four hundred years later. Faith is the link to God that makes one right with Him. Abraham had faith in God's plan and promise. We have the advantage of hindsight. We now know that all God's promises were summed up in Jesus and He fulfilled all of those promises. So, in essence, when Abraham believed God, when he trusted in His promise, he was also trusting in Jesus. Abraham did not know about Jesus he didn't even know His name, but he believed in the Father of Jesus and it was Jesus' Father who made the promise to Abraham. The only way to be right with God, to be saved, is to trust in God's saving plan.

This faith made Abraham the first of God's people. He became the family of God through faith and from Abraham came a much larger family—the Hebrew people. From the Hebrew people came an even larger family of faith—all believers in Jesus Christ. Abraham became the father of a huge family—the family of faith. This same faith not only makes us right with God and makes us part of His family but it is the faith by which we walk with God daily. As we believe Him and obey Him He saves us many times a day from sinful choices and activities.

Although Jesus came to live and walk on the earth at a specified time, Jesus has always existed. When Abraham trusted God's promises he was trusting Jesus. Give thanks to the salvation and deliverance that comes through God's promises, all summed up in Jesus.

Day 4

First Read Romans 4:18-25

Counting is a very simple activity for most adults and even some very young children. Paul again tells us that Abraham's faith was counted or put on his account as that which made him righteous. It was not any work he did. We know Abraham's faith was not easy. In fact, it is written in these passages that Abraham, "*contrary to hope, in hope believed.*" His belief and trust in God was contrary to human logic. He had no human reason to believe. He and Sarah were well past the age of having children. Humanly speaking, it was impossible. Warren Wiersbe says,

One reason why God delayed in sending Abraham and Sarah a son was to permit all their natural strength to decline and then disappear. It was unthinkable that a man ninety-nine years old could beget a child in the womb of his wife who was eighty-nine years old! From a reproductive point of view, both of them were dead.¹⁴

But Abraham believed anyway. This was counted to him as right standing with God. It made no sense. It was humanly illogical. It could only be a divine plan.

Here is our link of belief which is credited to us. Just as Abraham and Sarah believed and it was credited to them as righteous the same is true of us. It is spelled out in verses 24-25. Here it says this was imputed, which is another way of saying credited. We learn what we are to believe about Jesus. First, we are to believe in God who raised Jesus from the dead. Then, we need to believe that Jesus died for our sins. Lastly, we must believe that Jesus was raised from the dead to make us justified. All of this is contrary to human logic. Where did such a plan come from? Would a human come up with such a plan? Not hardly. All of man's supposed plans to get right with God have to do with man doing things that will earn God's favor. God's plan is contrary because it has nothing to do with our activity but is totally dependent upon God's activity: His Son dying for sin; His Son raised from the dead. What do we do? Believe.

What a simple plan. Do you believe?

¹⁴Bible Exposition Commentary (BE Series) - New Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary - New Testament, Volume 1.

Day 5

First Read Isaiah 53:10

This verse is found in a section known as songs of the suffering servant. From before the world began God had already planned to send His only Son Jesus into the world to become the sacrificial lamb. This verse sets forth Jesus as God's substitute for our sinfulness. He is God's atoning sacrifice for sin. Our Heavenly Father took the initiative long before the disciples, Abraham, and even Adam and Eve, lived. He spoke about Jesus through the prophets of old and told us of His plan. In Acts 2:22-23 Peter made it clear that Jesus' suffering and death was not of human planning but was purposed by God.

Isaiah explained the cross from God's point of view. God "*bruised Him*" in the beatings and in having Him nailed to the cross. God put Him to grief. It was God who caused Jesus to go through the suffering. It was God who made Jesus an offering for sin. Jesus was God's sacrificial offering for our sin. This is overwhelming to read and think about because it was His own Father who put Him through the ordeal of suffering and the cross. His suffering and death were not a tragedy but a triumph of God over sin for our sake. There are two statements that make it clear that His suffering would not end in death. First, "*He shall see His seed.*" Jesus had no children by marriage but He has a multitude of offspring by His death and resurrection. Second, "*He shall prolong His days*" tells of His resurrection. God will bring the victory of resurrection. God gives the victory.

The very last statement of verse 10 takes my mind to a favorite passage of scripture which says, "*Who for the joy set before Him endured the cross.*" This is found in Hebrews 12:2. Jesus saw the cross as the joy before Him. He was doing His Father's will. It was His pleasure to accomplish His Father's purpose of salvation from sin.

What a blessing to know that the Father loves us so much and wants us free from sin and with Him forever, so that He took all the steps and He made the sacrifice. What an amazing love!

WEEK 60 Believe and Confess -----Chris Watson

The gospel is so simple and yet it is so complex. Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians that the gospel is this; Jesus lived, died, was resurrected, and lives so that we might know God through Him. And yet the more we study the gospel, the more we learn and grow. In the Gospels and in the New Testament there were really three main words that were used when it came to salvation. Two of those are “repent” and “believe” and the other was “confess.” This week we will look at what it means to believe, repent, and confess.

Day 1

First Read Romans 9:24-10:4

I have often described Romans as Paul trying his best, under God’s direction, to help Israel understand that they are not saved by the law (works) but by grace. We see this continued in our passage this week. The end of chapter 9 shares that many won’t get or receive God’s grace and the beginning of chapter 10 tells us why. Before Christ, the law (God’s law) was to be kept. Don’t get me wrong! We are to keep God’s law and follow Him now, but in Old Testament times, keeping God’s laws showed that you loved Him, as does obeying and following Him and His Word today. However, the Israelites took it a step further. They believed that keeping the law and doing “right” or making themselves look good was what made them right with God. So in his letter to the Romans, Paul tried to help them understand that keeping the whole law or even some of it could not save them. Rather, trusting in God’s righteousness and His keeping of the law for us and placing our faith and hope in Him accomplishes our salvation.

We see in today’s scripture that they had a “zeal” for God but not according to knowledge. Martin Luther said, “this is a terrible thing, which properly and alone resist faith, opposes obedience to God’s Word, and makes men stiff-necked and incorrigible, as we perceive this in heretic and schematics. For they insist upon their ‘good intentions’ with stiff-necked and obstinate opposition, just as though they could not be mistaken they believe that their salvation is altogether based upon the fact that they have good intentions and zeal for God. Such person the Bible describes most properly as perverse in heart and corrupt in mind. Therefore we must note that to have a zeal of God according to knowledge means to regard nothing else as greater than always to be ready with fear and trembling and to be guided, led and instructed (by God) in all that is good, no matter how insignificant it may be.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Commentary on Romans, Martin Luther

No matter our best intentions, as good as we try to be at keeping the law, nothing can save us but God, for if we could save ourselves we wouldn't need Jesus. The fact that we are sinful and can't save ourselves reminds us we are truly in desperate need of a Savior. Do you find yourself "beating your chest" at how good you are, how well you obey God's law? Do you think God should be happy to have you on His team? Repent! Trust in His goodness, His grace, and the fact that through Jesus we are on His team. We are His children.

Day 2

First Read Romans 10:5-13

Today we come to a section of scripture that is one of the most quoted scripture. Many of the Jews had a hard time believing that the man crucified was the Messiah. However, if they knew this truth or trusted that He was indeed the Messiah and if they also trusted and put their faith in Him and the fact that Jesus is Lord and was raised from the dead, they would be saved. The Jews would have clearly understood up to this point that one could not merely acknowledge the facts and then continue one's day, but that acknowledging this truth and following it would absolutely change their lives, for this man Jesus was the Son of God.

Verse 10 tells us that the heart believes unto righteousness. This also clarified to the Jews and any others that salvation could not be earned, but had to be received by trusting and putting one's faith in Jesus to cover their sins. The second part of the salvation process is to confess such actions with their (our) mouth. "Confession is the chief work of faith; for here man denies himself and confesses God. And he dies (to himself) in his confession of God by the denial of himself; for there can be no greater denial of oneself that this, that one does to confess God. By doing this, he surrenders himself, in order that God may be confirmed and (his) confession of Him (may be confirmed)."¹⁶

Again, the Jews would clearly have known to confess Jesus as the Savior and His having risen from the dead would be a game changer. This was not just a "head nod" confession but one that would definitively change the course of one's life.

What about you? Have you trusted Jesus as your Savior? How has it changed your life? Do you just give God lip service or your whole life? Take some time to think on this questions and thank God that He has changed your life!

¹⁶Commentary on Romans, Martin Luther

Day 3

First Read Romans 10:14-15

“Paul now takes these two ‘whosoever’ verses, and from them answers the Jew, who not only relied on his law-keeping instead of on simple faith to save him, but also denied that either Paul or any of the apostles has any right to proclaim salvation by a simple message,- a message that left out the law and Judaism. If salvation were to come unto them that ‘call on the name of the Lord’ argues Paul, calling is impossible to one who has not believed on the Lord; and believing is impossible to one who has not heard the message about the Lord; and hearing is impossible unless someone comes preaching the message; and preaching is impossible except the messenger be Divinely sent!”¹⁷

Paul made this argument or statement to the Jews, but it also applies to us. Through Paul’s writing God reminds us that we are to go and tell. We are saved when we trust in Jesus, but Jesus also gave us the command to go and make disciples and to be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the world (Acts 1:8). In other words, once we trust Christ and as we grow in Him, we have a responsibility to share the gospel with others. We are to share Him both in word and deed with our family, those with whom we work or go to school, our community, and the entire world. In earlier devotions I have referenced how God has commanded us to “go.” We don’t have to pray whether or not we are to go and share the gospel. That’s a given; it’s a command. Now, we might pray about where God would have us go, maybe about a specific mission trip, or that God would give us the words to say and the right timing to share with our friends. But there is no question about whether or not we are to share. God commands it.

So how are you taking the Gospel to your family, your community, and the world? Some are truly physically unable, yet they can be prayer supporters and, perhaps, even financial supporters for those who can go. For those of us physically able, what’s holding you back from going to China, Canada, Russia, or another part of the world to share the Gospel? If we know it’s God’s will, we just need to join Him in it. In fact, as of this writing we will be praying over the mission team leaving for Canada (5/29/16), five from Fayetteville and three from Hollonville. Will you be obedient to go? Maybe next time we will be praying over you? How will God use you?

¹⁷Romans, Verse by Verse A Classical Commentary, William R. Newell

Day 4

First Read Romans 10:16-21

Verse 16 begins, *“But not all the Israelites accepted the good news.”* The good news is that some Israelites believed and trusted in Jesus. In fact, there are several places in Romans and Acts that it is recorded that “some (Jews) believed.” This is great news. On the other hand, the bad news is that if some believed that means some didn’t. We understand this in the rest of today’s passage.

Throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament, the Lord sought to reveal Himself to the Israelites, specifically, but we know from Romans that the gospel would be for all people, as well. While the Israelites concerned themselves with keeping the “Law”, making themselves look good in front of others, and seeking their own righteousness, God revealed Himself to gentiles (all those who were not Jewish). Paul noted in verse 21 that the Jews were disobedient and obstinate, as if they wanted to do things their own way.

Have you ever been like that? Have you ever sought to do things your own way and be totally disobedient? How did it work? Unfortunately, I have and it didn’t work well. Some of the Israelites were doing this and others totally shunned the gospel. What about you? Do you know the gospel? I am not talking about just knowing the facts of the gospel, but have you turned from your “self-righteousness” to God’s? Have you trusted in Him as your Savior? If not, call on His name now to save you. If you have trusted in Him, thank Him for your salvation. Thank Him that He revealed Himself to you. Take some time to pray for those you know who are still stiff-arming God and His gospel. Pray for those who may have trusted in Jesus but have wandered far away from Him. Don’t just pray for them today, but add them to your prayer list and pray often for them. In the meantime, pray that God would keep you in His will, following and obeying Him.

Day 5

First Read Isaiah 65:1-2

Romans 11 speaks of how we “gentiles” have been grafted in. We are reminded that Israel is God’s chosen people but God has given the Gospel to everyone therefore this makes us grafted in. We won’t read Romans 11:11-24 as a part of our devotions, but I encourage you to read it today, it will help in understanding just what God has done for us. Remember, Isaiah was written hundreds of years before Christ came so this again was a prophecy that the Gospel would spread and would be for all peoples. Take some time as a part of your devotion and thank God that He has revealed Himself to you. Thank Him that He saved you and opened your eyes to the Truth. As a part of that prayer ask that God would make clear to you the opportunities today to share that Gospel with others.

Verse 2 of today’s passage speaks of those (Israel) who don’t walk in good ways and, in fact, pursue their own imagination. In school we learned that an imagination is a good thing and it can be if used for the right purposes. However, if imaginations are used and our “imagination run wild” we can get ourselves in a lot of trouble. No one woke up one morning and committed an unthinkable act leaving others stunned without having first thought it through. In other words when one follows the path of sin, it’s just that, a path. And as the path is followed, often in our imagination (head), it leads us to places that we think we want to go but really don’t. Have you ever found yourself imagining or daydreaming of things ungodly? If so confess it and when it happens again, flee. If our minds are set on the things of God, like scripture tells us they need to be, then our minds are on the right things. The problem is when we focus on the ungodly things.

Romans 1:30 describes some very evil people. People that let their imaginations run wild, so much so that it said they “invented” ways of doing evil. Wow, that’s pretty bad. Are you following God or following the enemy? Is your mind on the things of God or the things of this world? Are you focusing on your ungodly imagination or the Truth of God? Today, set your mind on the things of God and as scripture says let your mind be transformed (changed) to that of God’s!

WEEK 61 PAUL IN CHAINS-----Dennis Watson

The explosion and spread of the gospel into the world continued. Paul persevered to preach the gospel and his focus had turned to the gentiles, but his heart still ached for his people to receive the gospel. Paul had entered into a vow with some other believers. When they went into the temple area the Jewish people assumed that Paul had taken some of his gentile friends into the temple area where no foreigner was allowed to go. They seized Paul with the intent to kill him. However, Roman guards took Paul into custody. A near riot broke out due in part to the anger of the people toward Paul, but mostly due to their illogical hostility. Paul was taken into custody and faced several trials and hearings, all of which became opportunities for him to share Jesus and his faith. Finally, Paul made his appeal to Caesar. His case would be heard in Rome. Our biblical historical account now picks up with his journey to Rome.

Day 1

First Read Acts 26:19-32

Paul found himself in Caesarea, no longer before the governor Festus, but before King Herod Agrippa. Agrippa was in town and wanted to hear from Paul so he looked forward to the opportunity. The king pretty much gave Paul open mic by telling him to speak for himself. What an opportunity! Paul took full advantage of it. Paul told him about the vision and experience on the road to Damascus. He told Agrippa that Jesus spoke to him and told him he would be the Lord's servant and witness. Paul said that he had to be faithful and obedient to his calling. He explained that he had preached repentance, which was why the Jews had seized him. All he had done was be faithful to the message of Moses and the prophets in preaching about Jesus and His resurrection from the dead.

The governor Festus had heard Paul before Agrippa, so when Paul spoke of the resurrection of Jesus Festus accused Paul of being out of his mind, driven insane by his learning. Paul turned it around and denied his insanity and told his listeners that Agrippa knew what was going on. He asked Agrippa point blank, "Do you believe the prophets? I know you do." Talk about boldness! Paul was taking it to them. Oh, to have been a fly on the wall. Paul was not being disrespectful; he knew what was true and just wanted Agrippa to acknowledge what he knew. King Agrippa gave a response which is best expressed in the NIV, "*Then Agrippa said to Paul, 'Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?'*" (Acts 26:28) Agrippa knew what was going on. Paul was seeking to lead Agrippa and everyone in the room to salvation through Jesus Christ.

Paul was clearly on mission—all the time! Wouldn't it be great if we would see our lives as a mission? When we are on mission trips we know why we are in that place. Paul saw that everything that happened in his life was to advance the gospel. He was not defending himself. He was presenting the gospel. Paul wanted everyone to become like himself, except for the chains.

As the meeting came to a close neither Festus nor Agrippa believed Paul had done anything deserving death or prison. However, Paul had already made his appeal to Caesar and he was about to be on his way to Rome.

Ask the Lord for the grace to be reminded that you are always on mission.

Day 2

First Read Acts 27:9-28:16

The long journey began for Paul and his servant-companion Aristarchus who was with him. Luke had returned as one of Paul's traveling companions. We see this in Luke's use of the pronoun "we" again. Ultimately the trip would be in an Egyptian grain ship with 276 passengers. Paul had warned that the journey would be dangerous, due to its timing during the stormy season, but he was ignored.

However, as the journey continued, it became true of Paul, "Paul began as a prisoner and ended as the captain." Paul was assertive and aggressive and was not afraid to take charge and speak up.

"A crisis does not make a person; a crisis shows what a person is made of, and it tends to bring true leadership to the fore. Paul gently rebuked the centurion, pilot, and captain for ignoring his warning. Soon they would discover that God had spared all of them only because of Paul."¹⁸

Paul encouraged the crew. Paul shared God's word with his captive audience. He gave warnings. He was an example before them. God's people should be doing all of these things. Paul took seriously his call to be light in a dark world and to give hope and encouragement.

The ship, crew, and passengers struggled in the violent sea for fourteen days and nights. They had gone several days without seeing the sun or the stars, so they could not determine where they were. Paul encouraged them to eat and stay with the ship, so that they would all be saved from the storm. They threw the cargo over the side of the ship to lighten the load. After two weeks, they ran the ship aground. All 276 passengers and prisoners made it to land safely.

¹⁸Bible Exposition Commentary (BE Series) - New Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary - New Testament, Volume 1

The land was the isle of Malta. The people of the island welcomed them and showed them hospitality, building a fire to help the people from the ship keep warm. Paul, never taking on the role of a victim but remaining always a servant, was gathering sticks for the fire when a snake latched onto his hand. The people of the island assumed this was a sign that Paul was a criminal and would die of the bite. Not only did he not die but he began to heal the sick people of the island.

After three months on the island they boarded another ship and traveled on to Rome where Paul served and was served.

What an amazing account of a man who was under arrest. He did not mope and pout. He did not live his life as a victim. He went right to work in every situation and circumstance taking every thought captive to the obedience of Jesus Christ.

We are not victims! Because of Jesus we are victors. Be lifted up and encouraged. Serve the Lord by serving others at all times!

Day 3

First Read Acts 28:17-31

Day three each week is the time to connect the week's scripture to Jesus and the gospel. The last fifteen verses of Acts powerfully continue the account of Paul and his ministry of the gospel in Rome. Just a few days after arriving in Rome he gathered the Jewish leaders together and shared his story with them, what he had been doing and how he came to be in the position he was in. He did not complain or offer negative words. His focus was on presenting Jesus and the gospel. He understood that the gospel was the number one need of all people and that it took precedence over everything else.

The Jewish leaders at Rome knew about Christianity but had not received any correspondence about Paul. They said they had heard of the sect and that it was "spoken against everywhere." They obviously did not understand, so Paul taught them.

On one particular day he preached the gospel to them, sharing that it was rooted in the writings of Moses and the prophets. From morning until evening he reasoned with them urging them to come to Jesus. Some were persuaded. However, others were not and Paul applied the passage from Isaiah 6:9-10 to them. Paul rebuked those who did not believe, letting them know that because of their unbelief the gospel was sent to the gentiles, who would believe.

Paul kept "open house" and received anybody who wanted to discuss the things of the kingdom of God. He was chained to a guard and the guards were relieved every six hours, so they were forced to listen as Paul preached and taught and prayed. No wonder some of them were saved! (Phil. 1:12-14; 4:22)¹⁹

For two years Paul continued to preach and teach in Rome. The very last word of Acts tells us that he did so without hindrance. Nothing got in the way of his proclamation of the truth!

What a challenge for us today! We need to be about the message of the gospel and not allow anything to hinder its presentation.

¹⁹Bible Exposition Commentary (BE Series) - New Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary - New Testament, Volume 1.

Day 4

First Read Philippians 1:12-16

So what do you know? Paul knew what he was about. He was about the gospel; like Jesus, he was about his Father's business. This was Paul's motive. Therefore, whatever came his way was simply another opportunity to give testimony, either by word or deed, to the message of the gospel. This is what Paul was saying when he said, "*The things which happened to me*" are those things which Luke described in Acts 21:17-28:31. This period of time covered more than four years of Paul's life.

Warren Wiersbe really expresses the sentiment of Paul's words:

"To many, all of this would have looked like failure, but not to this man with a "single mind," concerned with sharing Christ and the Gospel. Paul did not find his joy in ideal circumstances; he found his joy in winning others to Christ. And if his circumstances promoted the furtherance of the Gospel, that was all that mattered! The word furtherance means "pioneer advance." It is a Greek military term referring to the army engineers who go before the troops to open the way into new territory. Instead of finding himself confined as a prisoner, Paul discovered that his circumstances really opened up new areas of ministry."²⁰

Attitude is huge in approaching life. Some have even said that attitude is everything. I prefer to think of it this way. It is not as important what happens to you as it is how you respond to it. Paul seemed to have it all nailed down. Whatever came his way was received as an occasion to advance the gospel. For me, an occasion involves this time, this place, and these people. So what am I going to do? I can fuss. I can complain. I can mope like a child whose feelings have been hurt. Or, I can use this time and this place to advance the gospel to these people!

Hey, let's do it! Let's use all occasions to advance the gospel whether by word or deed.

²⁰Bible Exposition Commentary (BE Series) - New Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary - New Testament, Volume 2.

Day 5

First Read Psalm 22:22-31

On day five we look at a Psalm or passage from one of the prophets to see how they connect to Jesus. Today we look at Psalm 22:22-31. This section of Psalms, chapters 22-24, are Messianic Psalms; they prophecy about Jesus the Messiah. In chapter 22 we see the Good Shepherd who dies for the sheep. In Psalm 23 we see the Great Shepherd who lives for and cares for the sheep. Psalm 24 is about the Chief Shepherd returning in glory for their service.

The last part of Psalm 22 describes how Jesus' death provides salvation for us. In Hebrews 2:11-12, the writer of Hebrews attributes the words of Psalm 22:22 to Jesus, Himself. Jesus said that one day He will call all believers His brethren. In **Hebrews 2:11** the writer noted that, "*He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all one.*" By this he was saying that Jesus, the One who saves, and those who are being saved are one. Jesus made this possible; in doing so, He made us all part of the same family!

When Paul got to Rome he gathered the believers at Rome together and called them "brothers." Jesus has brought us together and made us His spiritual offspring. He is the "firstborn among many brothers." Kinship is made possible for us by the work of Jesus' salvation through the cross.

This is the promise that God made to Abraham in Genesis 12:3. All of the nations of the world would be blessed. What an incredible unfolding of God's plan. We see it in Genesis, Psalms, Acts, and Hebrews. It all connects!

Give thanks for God's incredibly amazing plan to bless all people!

WEEK 62 The Supremacy of Christ-----Chris Watson

God is in charge, praise the Lord! I am not in charge. You are not in charge. Sure, we may oversee others at our jobs, in our homes, or in other situations, but ultimately God is in charge and sees everything. He knows what's going on and is working things for our good and His glory. He is ultimately supreme.

Day 1

First Read Colossians 1:1-12

A man by the name of Epaphras was visiting when Paul preached in Ephesus; both he and Philemon became believers. Epaphras started the church in Colossae by preaching the gospel there. "While Paul was under house arrest, he shared the story of how the Colossians first became Christians. After that, Paul and Epaphras prayed together for the Colossian church, along with Timothy, who came to visit Paul. One day while Timothy was with Paul, Paul decided to send the Colossian church a letter like he did for some of the churches he had begun. That way, even though he had to remain in prison, he could greet the church, encourage them, and teach them with his letter. Paul hoped that his instruction would help them fight against the bad teaching that some false teachers were spreading in the churches in Asia."²¹

Paul's opening twelve verses were simply an encouragement to the Church at Colossae. He was commending them, because he had heard of their faith and how the gospel was spreading because of their faith. Paul was thankful for them and their love for Jesus and the gospel. Paul went on to give them godly instruction, but before doing so he wanted to boast in Christ and what He had done through them.

Have you ever had someone share with you that something you said, did, or just the way you lived your life was an encouragement to them and their faith? Do you have someone in your life who is an encouragement to you in your walk with Christ? Can you think of others who are advancing the gospel for God's kingdom? What specific people come to mind regarding the last two questions? Maybe you should consider sending them a note, email, text, or calling them to let them know you are thankful for them and what God has or is doing through them. Take some time today to pray and thank God for those people who have been instrumental in your life and your spiritual walk.

²¹Old Story New, Marty Machowski

Day 2

First Read Colossians 1:13-18

Paul's words in our passage today have a little deeper meaning than meets the eye. Gnosticism was "being pushed" by some and it was not at all the full gospel. "The unknowable God was far too pure and perfect to have anything to do with the material universe which was considered evil. Therefore, God generated lesser divinities or emanations. One of these emanations, Wisdom, desired to know the unknowable God. Out of this erring desire the demiurge, an evil god, was formed, and it was this evil god that created the universe. He along with archons kept the mortals in bondage in material matter and tried to prevent the pure spirit souls from ascending back to god after the death of the physical bodies. Since, according to the Gnostics, matter is evil, deliverance from material form was attainable only through special knowledge revealed by special Gnostic teachers. Christ was the divine redeemer who descended from the spiritual realm to reveal the knowledge necessary for this redemption. In conclusion, Gnosticism is dualistic. That is, it teaches there is a good and evil, spirit and matter, light and dark, etc., dualism in the universe. The danger of Gnosticism is easily apparent. It denies the incarnation of God as the Son. In so doing, it denies the true efficacy of the atonement since, if Jesus is not God, He could not atone for all of mankind, and we would still be lost in our sins."²² Read today's verses again with this additional background in mind. Now we see that Paul was seeking to give truth in light of the lies that were being told. Gnosticism taught that "salvation" was achieved through a special knowledge, not by Christ's finished work.

In understanding the gospel, it's important that we understand it all, from the very beginning knowing that God is the creator and sustainer of all things (see verse 16). When we begin with the knowledge that God was the beginning, then we can move forward in the gospel. Paul wanted the people not to be manipulated and swayed by a false teaching, so he wrote them to share and remind them of the truth.

There are many "lies" in our world today. Some say whatever you think God is, go for that. Others say there are multiple ways to God and some say that God does not exist at all. We have the truth. In fact, if you have trusted and experienced God in a real way there is no question who and what God has done. Ask God to protect you from the "lies" or the half-truths and then follow only Him and His Word.

²² <https://carm.org/gnosticism>, Matt Slick

Day 3

First Read Colossians 1:19-23

In verse 19 we read the word “fullness.” This would have been an obvious slap at the Gnostics as they used the same word (pleroma) to denote the “divines” of lesser gods. Remember that a major focus of Colossians was to speak to the supremacy of God and against such beliefs as those held by the Gnostics.

Verse 21 describes how we were alienated from God and enemies as well in our minds. Romans 5:10 also reminds us that we were once enemies of God. Therefore, we can understand that people are separated into two categories; all people are either friends or enemies of God. Which are you? I pray that you are a friend of God. Paul told the Colossians that they had been reconciled to God, meaning that their (and our) relationship needed to be fixed or made right and the only thing that could do that was Christ and His death, burial, and resurrection. "It is said that years ago in a western city a husband and wife became estranged and chose to separate. They moved away and lived in different parts of the country. The husband happened to return to the city on a matter of business and went out to the cemetery to the grave of their only son. He was standing by the grave in fond reminiscence when he heard a step behind him. Turning, he saw his estranged wife. The initial impulse of both was to turn away. But they had a common hearted interest in the grave, and instead of turning way they clasped hands over the grave of their son and were reconciled. They were reconciled by death."²³

Our personal reconciliation took the death of God’s son, but His death went far beyond what any human death could. Jesus’ death took us from death to life, from darkness to light, and from despair to hope. When we put our trust in God’s work and what He has done for us we become a child and a friend of God. Thank God that He has reconciled you to Himself through Jesus. Thank God that He is supreme and in control. Ask God whom you can share what He has done for you, so they too can hear about your reconciliation to God. Then, pray that they really hear and that their minds may be open to the truth.

²³ Colossians and Philemon, The Supremacy of Christ. Kent Hughes

Day 4

First Read Colossians 1:24-29

On several occasions, in his writings, Paul uses the words sufferings and rejoice or joyful in the same sentences, as in verse 24. Paul, indeed, said he rejoiced in the sufferings. But how could he rejoice? Well, for one thing, we know his suffering brought good to the church. We know both from the Bible and through ancient and modern history that the gospel has flourished most often under difficult and hard situations, rather than under favorable and easy conditions. Not only has the church flourished during times of suffering and difficulty, but often so have the individuals who experienced the difficulties. Let's put it this way, have you learned more about God and your relationship with Him when things were great in your life and you were rocking along enjoying life without a care in the world? Or, have you learned more when things seemed to be falling apart or at the very least not working as you had planned? Most would say, myself included, that it was the latter that brought the most growth and refinement. In our times of struggle, difficulties, and maybe even "suffering," we have learned more about our walk with Christ than we might have without those challenges. I am sure there are many reasons for that but probably the biggest is that when we find ourselves in those situations, we seem to lean on and walk with God more than when things are going well. Can you rejoice in the difficult and hard times like Paul did? Remember, he knew it was advancing the Church and he knew God was working in him as well.

We are reminded also that the "mystery" has now been made known in Christ. Because of this we are to preach and share the gospel with as many as we can. Paul, in verses 28-29, said we are to proclaim the truth to every man (and woman) that they too may be made perfect in Christ. The word "labor" is used in verse 29 and before we look at that we must realize that in our laboring we do not do anything in our power or might, but in God's; in other words, it's not us, but Christ in us. The Greek word translated "labor" was used for work that left one so weary that it was if they had taken a beating.²⁴ Paul preached the gospel all over with all his might. Many great preachers and theologians, such as Luther, Moody, and Wesley were have said to preach and teach to the point that they gave everything they had. Now, before I go on, I want to make sure we get this. This is not to say this is on "us." God saves, but as we remember from earlier passages, there have to be those that go, preach, and teach. In doing so we labor and become tired. Paul's life exemplified this, but we find our strength in God as he did. Regardless of job or trade we must preach and share the gospel. "What is true of the minister is true of every man who bears the

²⁴ Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians, F.F. Bruce and E.K. Simpson

name of Christ. We have not begun to touch the great business of salvation when we have sung 'Rescue the perishing, care for the dying.' We have not entered into the business of evangelizing the city or the work until we have put our own lives into the business, our one immediate physical endeavor, inspired by spiritual devotion."²⁵

Share, teach and preach Jesus today. Remember He has changed our lives and we want to share that with others so He can change their lives too.

Day 5

First Read Psalm 22:14-16

Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22 are two of the most prophetic chapters in the Bible concerning the Messiah, Jesus. Written hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, we see such prophecy played out in the gospels. What Jesus went through for you and me is astounding.

"The radical moisture of his body was dried up through his loss of blood and spirits, and through the violent fever upon him, brought on him by his being hurried from court to court; and which generally attends persons under a panic, in consternation and fear of danger and death, and at crucifixion; or this was occasioned by the inward sorrow and distress of his mind, which affected his body and dried his bones, as a broken spirit is said to do, Proverbs 17:22; and chiefly it was brought upon him through the sense he had the wrath of God, which like fire dried up his strength, just as a potsherd burnt in a furnace; which expresses his dolorous sufferings, which were typified by the Passover lamb being roasted with fire, and the manna being baked in pans." Regarding verse 15 as his tongue clang to his jaw. "Thus Christ answered not a word to the charges of the false witnesses before the high priest, nor to the accusations of the chief priests and elders before Pilate; nor did he open his mouth, when he was led to be crucified, neither against the law and justice of God, nor against his people for whom he suffered, nor against his enemies who used him cruelly; when he was reviled he reviled not again; but rather this was occasioned by thirst, through the violent fever that was upon him; see Lamentations 4:4; Hence, when he hung upon the cross, he said, 'I thirst,' John 19:28."²⁶

Jesus is good; He is so good to us. Thank Him today not only for what He did for you, but for His great plan and His desire to save you to Himself. As you are thanking Him, ask Him who He would have you share your story with today? Someone needs to hear it, they need to hear what He has done in your life.

²⁵ The Westminster Pulpit, Volumes 3, 4. G Campbell Morgan

²⁶ <http://www.christianity.com/bible/commentary.php?com=gill&b=19&c=22> John Gills' Exposition of the Bible.

WEEK 63 CHOSEN BEFORE THE WORLD BEGAN---- Dennis Watson

While Paul was imprisoned he wrote four letters known as the prison epistles: Philippians, Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. Paul was imprisoned in Rome for two years. During this particular imprisonment he wrote Ephesians. Ephesians can be divided into two parts. Ephesians 1-3 is theological or doctrinal. Ephesians 4-6 is practical and spells out the believer's responsibility based on the theological/doctrinal passages. We will see that God's plan to save and establish for Himself a special people was laid out before the world was ever created.

Day 1

First Read Ephesians 1:1-6

In order to properly build a building, the very first step is to lay the foundation. The foundation of a building is the part below the ground which supplies stable support for the building. In addition to the foundation, and even before the foundation is laid, there must be a plan for the building. God has a plan that reaches back before time. In today's passage, Paul wrote about this plan and the foundation which is from God. Today we will look at what God purposed from the very beginning and even before.

Paul used four words in these passages that describe the foundation God has provided. The first word is "blessed." He wrote that believers have been blessed by God; He *"has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus."* The blessing is from God and is spiritual in nature, coming through the Holy Spirit. We are blessed to have God's Spirit living in us. He provides blessings of security, sealing, and everything we need for life and godliness. Besides being spiritual in nature, these blessings also have a sphere. As Christians we live in two spheres: the human and the divine, the visible and the invisible. We also have blessings which are out of this world. Our citizenship is in heaven. Heaven is the believer's ultimate hope; our hope is not in this world. We have real blessings that are eternal and are far greater than any blessing that we will have temporarily.

The second word is "chosen." This is that glorious doctrine known as election. God chose us in Christ, not in ourselves. Salvation is all of God's work. And He did this before the foundation of the world. As believers we are chosen by God. That is not to say we did not have to make a decision to respond to His grace but it is still the work of God. Warren Wiersbe really gives a good explanation of this:

Does the sinner respond to God's grace against his own will? No, he responds because God's grace makes him willing to respond. The mystery of divine sovereignty and human responsibility will never be solved in this life. Both are taught in the Bible (John 6:37). Both are true, and both are essential.²⁷

The third word in this section that is foundational for the believer is “predestined.” This can be a confusing concept. Paul writes that we have “been “predestined to adoption.” The word “predestined” has to do with saved people. It means that God planned and purposed beforehand to save. This says nothing about anyone being predestined to be lost. So God has beforehand determined to adopt or bring you into His family. Again, this is the work of God.

The last word is “accepted.” As believers our acceptance is based in Christ, referred to here as the “beloved.” We cannot make ourselves acceptable to God. The literal translation is that we have been “be-graced.” All of this is the work of God. Our part is to receive and appropriate what He has done for us.

Give thanks for His activity on your behalf!

²⁷Bible Exposition Commentary (BE Series) - New Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary - New Testament, Volume 2.

Day 2

First Read Ephesians 1:7-12

As we read yesterday, God's work was the work of election. Before the world began, He set out a plan to save and adopt believers. In today's passage we see the work of the Son, Jesus. His work was that of mediation. This is God's plan put into action through the work of Jesus Christ.

We have redemption. Jesus redeemed us through His blood. He made it possible for us have our sins forgiven and all of this through the riches of His grace. To 'redeem' means to purchase and set free by paying a price. Slaves were often bought and sold like pieces of furniture. Sometimes a person would purchase a slave and then set them free. This is what Jesus did for us. The price paid was the blood of Jesus. In doing this He set us free from the law, free from slavery to sin, and free from the power of sin and the world. As slaves we were poor; as children of God we are rich.

Through Jesus Christ, the mystery of His will is made known to us. A mystery is something that was not previously revealed or understood. This mystery has now been disclosed to us. The church was not known in the Old Testament. The Old Testament saints had no concept of the church. A dispensation is God's way of dealing with man. It is clear that how He dealt with the Jews in the Old Testament and how He deals with people after the resurrection of Jesus are different. This plan has been made known to us through Jesus. We now know that God will one day unite everything in Christ.

The last aspect of the mediating work of Jesus is that He provided an inheritance. In Christ we have an inheritance and we are an inheritance. He provided the price to purchase us. We are valuable to God. We are also joint-heirs with Christ.

God purposed to elect us as His children and Jesus is the instrument of His grace to accomplish our redemption, reconciling us to His will. Thus making us both His inheritance and joint-heirs with Him.

Give thanks for His work through Jesus on our behalf.

Day 3

First Read Ephesians 1:13-14

It is day three of the week which is the day we connect the week's devotions to the gospel. The entire process of salvation is given in verse 13. It tells how the sinner becomes a saint. A saint is a believer. This is not something earned; it is something God accomplishes through the process of salvation. The word "saint" is used nine times in the book of Ephesians. The process described in this verse goes like this: the gospel was heard and the hearers believed and trusted what they heard, having realized the gospel was for them. They were then sealed by the Holy Spirit. The process was hearing, believing, trusting, and then being sealed with the Holy Spirit.

What does it mean to be "sealed with the Holy Spirit of Promise?" It means a finished transaction. When significant legal documents are processed they are stamped with an official seal indicating that the deal is done and ratified. In addition to signifying a finished transaction, the sealing speaks of ownership. God has purchased us. He has bought us with a price; that price was the life blood of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit has marked us with a seal of both completion and ownership. Also, the sealing of the Holy Spirit is a mark of authenticity. The presence of the Holy Spirit proves the believer is genuine. God's Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are God's children (Romans 8:16). The Holy Spirit of God seals us, so we are confident.

The Holy Spirit is also the guarantee of our inheritance until the process of salvation is complete. Remember, we have been saved, we are being saved, and ultimately we will be saved. In the meantime, the Holy Spirit is in us as a pledge that all will be completed. It is like earnest money that is put down on a purchase, guaranteeing that the final payment will be made, and the transaction will be completed.

I am totally confident that God has done what He promised. My confidence is not in what I have done, but in what God has done, is doing, and will do. Remember though, God accomplished this before the foundation of the world and in Christ it has been and will be played out in history. Rejoice in the finished work of God and at the same time anticipate the full experience of it!

Day 4

First Read Ephesians 1:15-23

Paul rejoiced in the faith of the Ephesians and for this reason he wrote telling them that he prayed for them and gave them the specifics of his prayer. Paul, as their servant-leader, was all wrapped up in praying for the believers at Ephesus. We can learn from Paul four aspects of praying for other believers.

First, he prayed that they would know God. He prayed that God would give them, *“The spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him.”* Paul knew God personally and wanted them to also know Him this way. The atheist believes there is no god. The agnostic believes that if there is a god he cannot be known. What a blessing it is to know God and grow in that knowledge of Him. To know God personally is salvation. To know Him in growth is sanctification. To know Him in perfection is glorification. Paul wanted the saints at Ephesus to fully know God.

Secondly, Paul prayed that the believers at Ephesus would *know God’s calling.* Paul knew that he had been called by God’s grace. The calling that a believer has in Christ assures us of a delightful future. The word for church in the Greek means “called out.” We are called out of the world into a relationship with the God of the universe. He prayed that believers would know the hope of His calling. This hope we have in Christ is the motivation of our lives. Warren Wiersbe describes this hope this way:

“The hope that belongs to our calling should be a dynamic force in our lives, encouraging us to be pure (1 John 2:28-3:3), obedient (Heb. 13:17), and faithful (Luke 12:42-48). The fact that we shall one day see Christ and be like Him should motivate us to live like Christ today.”²⁹

The third aspect of the prayer Paul prayed for the believers at Ephesus was that they would know *“the riches of the glory of His inheritance.”* This phrase does not refer to the inheritance in Christ. Instead, he was praying that believers would grasp their value to God. We are His inheritance! We are His body and His bride. Think about the price God paid for you. You are valuable to Him!

The fourth part of his prayer was that the saints would know *“the greatness of God’s power toward us.”* This is the outworking of God’s power expressed and experienced when God raised Jesus from the dead, seating Him in the heavenly realm. He is above all powers in all the earth and all things are placed at His feet.

²⁸Bible Exposition Commentary (BE Series) - New Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – New Testament, Volume 2

What a glorious prayer to pray for other believers. That they may know God, know His calling, know His riches, and know His power. Pray this prayer. We are blessed to have this outline to pray for other believers.

Day 5

First Read Zechariah 9:10-11

A dot connecting picture from the Psalms or the prophets is our focus on day five each week. Zechariah 9 is a prophecy of the coming of Christ in His final victory. Our world has been and continues to be plagued by war. We have had two world wars. Both of these were believed to be the war that would end all wars. However, all over the world war is being waged. Presidents and other national and international leaders have spoken of bringing peace. However, man will not bring peace. Another war will not bring peace.

Verse 10 of today's passage speaks of wars ending only when Jesus comes and brings with Him true peace. When Jesus comes in complete power He will speak peace to the nations. When He comes He will bring peace from sea to sea and to the ends of the earth. The words of Jesus carry authority and when He speaks things happen. When He speaks His word will go out with power; there will be true disarmament. Look at **Isaiah 2:4**,

"He shall judge between the nations, And rebuke many people; They shall beat their swords into plowshares, And their spears into pruning hooks; Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, Neither shall they learn war anymore."

As for verse 11, J. Vernon McGee says this,

"As for you' refers to the godly remnant in Israel which was suffering. The best I can do is to make a spiritual interpretation of this verse. The only deliverance for mankind is through the blood of the covenant, and that blood of the covenant is the blood of the New Testament, the blood of Christ. Man talks about his freedom and his liberty. Man in this world today does not recognize that he is actually a prisoner. He is 'sold under sin' (Rom. 7:14). He is a slave to sin. In a day in which we hear so much about liberty, I receive hundreds of letters from former drug addicts who have been delivered. How? Only by the blood of Christ, my friend, only by turning to Him for deliverance. He alone can deliver prisoners from 'the pit wherein is no water.'"³⁰

Thank the Lord God that there is a time of true peace coming. It will not be accomplished by man but only by the Prince of Peace.

²⁹Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

WEEK 64 From Death to Life----- Chris Watson

If you have ever seen a newborn baby or had the privilege of seeing a baby born, you know it's incredible. The opportunity to see new life enter the world is amazing. Even more so is that which is brought from death to life. As unbelievers we were once lost (dead) but God quickened our hearts, spoke to us, and saved us through faith. Thank God for being brought from death to life.

Day 1

First Read Ephesians 2:1-3

Scripture reminds us that we are dead (spiritually, we do not know God) in our sins. If we have believed and trusted in Christ, though, we are alive, a new creation. The Holy Spirit works in us unto salvation. "Resurrection (spiritual) is a gift from God. God must touch the heart. God must unstop the ears. God must quicken the soul. It is as great a miracle as when God created life and created you. It is as great a miracle as when God resurrected us from the dead to our spiritual life in Christ."³¹

God is the only one that can bring forth life from death. Only Jesus can do that. Scripture reminds us that no one comes to Jesus unless the Father, who sent Him, draws him. It is God who works in us. Though we are dead He brings new life. And there is a response needed on our part; we must trust in God, we must put our faith in Him to have eternal life and a relationship with Him. How has God drawn you to Himself? How did He save you when you walked in your sins?

Every person is either under the direction of the Holy Spirit or under the direction of "*the prince of the power of the air*" (enemy). There is no C or third option; it is just one or the other. Before we were believers, this passage tells us, we used to walk in the ways of the world and we conducted ourselves in the lusts of the flesh. We were children of wrath, meaning we were enemies of God. However, since God has saved us through His Son we are now friends of God. And since we are friends of God we should see ourselves yielding more and more to the Spirit of God and less and less to the ways of this world. Salvation is not just a one-time decision but as I have heard it said, it is a one-time decision to become a lifelong disciple of Jesus Christ. When we place our faith in Jesus we follow Him the rest of our lives.

Who are you yielding to today? The one of this world or Jesus? Who are you in tune with and who is directing you? Has God saved you? Thank Him that He has wakened you from the dead, removed the scales from your eyes, and made you His own.

³⁰Ephesians, An Exposition by W.A Criswell

Day 2

First Read Ephesians 2:4-10

Go back and read the first 2 words of verse 4. *“But God.”* We see these same two words all over scripture. In today’s passage, Paul said, *“but God”* has made us alive. Though we were once dead He has made us alive.

Ephesians 2:8-9 are some of the most quoted verses in all of the Bible and for good reason. We have been saved by grace, God’s grace though Jesus at the cross. That grace, though, is received through faith. We believe, trust, and know that Jesus died for our sins. Through faith we put our trust in what God did for us and we continue in trust. Romans 10:17 reminds us that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. So I must hear the truth of God, through God’s Word(s). *“Saving faith is accepting. I hear it, I accept it as true – the testimony of the Book and the testimony of other Christians. I came to believe that testimony. I have never been to Tibet, but I believe there is a Tibet. I have never been to Afghanistan. I have talked to people who were there. I believe this testimony and that it is the channel by which God’s grace comes to them. Your heart is made like your hands. Your hands are made on purpose to receive, to take. Your soul is made to take, to receive.”*³¹

We receive God’s love, praise the Lord, and it is nothing that we have done or can do. It is not by any works we or anyone else can do. If it were by works, then we wouldn’t need Jesus; we could just do it for ourselves. Instead, we are reminded that our good works are like filthy rags.

Take some time today to thank God for His free gift of salvation and His desire for us to know Him more daily and to be in tune with Him.

³¹Ephesians, An Exposition by W.A. Criswell

Day 3

First Read Ephesians 2:11-18

“Yesterday we learned the good news of the gospel. Today we learn (are reminded) that the good news of the gospel is for all people. When God called Abraham, he promised to bless all the people of the earth through him. Yet it wasn’t until Jesus died for the sins of all people that a way was opened up for the Gentiles to come to God. By trusting in Jesus, the Gentiles, who were once separated from God, can also join God’s family. God kept his promise to Abraham through Jesus, who was born into Abraham’s family line. So, way back when God promised to give Abraham a son and bless the nation, he was thinking of Jesus dying on the cross so that everyone, both Jew and Gentile, could be rescued from their sins.”³²

Verse 14 of today’s passage reminds us that Jesus broke down the wall of separation between us and God. Paul tells us in verse 16 that Jesus reconciled us to God and in verse 18 that we have access to God through Jesus. Salvation includes going to heaven in the “future” but it’s not just about our final destination. It’s also about what Jesus has done, mainly that He has given us the only way to know the one true God. Through Jesus we not only go to heaven but we can have that “heaven,” if you will, right now in the fact that we can intimately know God. The more we grow in that relationship the more we know God. If you have a relationship with someone, say a spouse, a close friend, or someone who really means a lot to you, there was a time when you initially met them. While that time may have been important, what has really grown your relationship is the time that you spent after meeting them, whether face to face, through phone calls, letters, or emails, just to name a few. Over time that relationship grew; you just didn’t meet them and then never talk to them or see them again. Rather, you invested in that relationship. The same is true for our relationship with God. There was a time, whether we remember all the details or not, that we met God through Jesus. While our initial conversion was important, what grew our relationship was the time in the Word, time in prayer, worshipping with other believers, and serving, just to name a few.

How is your relationship with God? Are you growing? If not, ask how you can spend time with God more regularly and invest time and energy in your relationship with God.

³²Old Story New, Marty Machowski

Day 4

First Read Ephesians 2:19-22

“In ancient building practices, the cornerstone was the principal stone placed at the corner of the edifice. The cornerstone was usually one of the largest, the most solid, and the most carefully constructed of any in the edifice. Jesus describes Himself as the Cornerstone that His church would be built upon, a unified body of believers, both Jew and Gentile. In the New Testament the cornerstone metaphor is continued. This time, however, the apostle Paul is preaching to the Ephesian Christians for the purpose of helping them know Christ better. In chapter 2, verses 19-21, the comparison between Jesus and Cornerstone becomes very clear: ‘Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.’ Furthermore, in the 1 Peter 2:6, what Isaiah said centuries before is affirmed in exactly the same words.”³³

Jesus is the chief cornerstone. If our foundation is off or faulty, then everything else will be off as well, but if our foundation is that of Jesus Christ, His blood, and His Word then all will be properly aligned. In today’s time we must remember that there is one truth and only one solid foundation and that is Christ. As Christ builds on that, that is as He works and moves in us, then He is building on that foundation. Now we have nothing to offer God but through our obedience He uses that to grow His Church and to draw others to Himself. Verse 22 says we are being “built together.” God is the one doing the building and growing and He is doing that in us. As God’s Church, whether ours or the one on the other side of the world, if we follow God and His Word then Christ’s love is shown in us and exemplified in the world.

Who or what is your foundation? Today there are many “half-truths” (and if it’s a half-truth, it’s a lie) being preached and taught. We must always take what we hear taught, preached, and conveyed in other ways and measure the teachings against Jesus Christ and His Word, the chief cornerstone. In doing so we make sure the building’s foundation is secure and the structure is not compromised. For when we compromise or give in to compromise our foundation is shaky. Pray today that your foundation is in Christ alone; if it’s not, ask God to change your view and your foundation.

³³<http://www.gotquestions.org/Jesus-Christ-cornerstone.html>

Day 5

First Read Isaiah 53:6

During our first year of marriage Lisa and I lived in an apartment in Peachtree City across from what is now The Avenue. One Sunday afternoon we decided to take a walk in the Planterra Ridge subdivision, allowing plenty of time before we needed to get back to church. However, on the way back we apparently took a wrong turn. Let's just say we ended up running back once we found our way. Otherwise, we were going to be late for church, particularly to the classes that we taught. We unintentionally went astray and got really turned around.

All through scripture and unfortunately in our own lives we know that all it takes is just one little step off the path to get completely off course. If we are not careful and don't jump right back on the path, we may go totally astray. That can cause serious repercussions. All unbelievers have gone astray; that is, we sinned, we turned to our own way. Not only were we born in Adam's line (lineage) of sin, but we also sinned, so we were both born in sin and sinned ourselves. But praise God for the second half of verse 6. Our sin (going astray) was laid on Jesus and He died for us. When we place our faith in Jesus, our sin is forgiven and Jesus, by His love and grace, brings us back to life.

Do you find yourself going astray right now? Is there something(s) that you are doing that you know will lead you down a path of destruction, regret, and lack of fellowship with God, unless you turn back? If so, repent and jump back on God's path, the only right path. If you find yourself walking the path but know you have a tendency to easily step off (as we all do), pray that when you are tempted to step off and give in to the enemy, that you will hear God's voice and follow Him, instead.

WEEK 65 THE GIFT OF MEN-----Dennis Watson

This week we look at God’s provision for our needs, not only in Christ but also in His church and in the leaders He has given to His church. We have briefly looked at the doctrinal part of Ephesians, found in Ephesians 1-3. Ephesians 4-6 is the more practical part of the book. Here we see our responsibilities, what we should be doing in light of the theological truths laid down in chapters 1-3. The theological sets us up to put truth into practice.

DAY 1

First Read Ephesians 4:1-6

Now that we are in the practical section of Ephesians, we can see how Paul connected the theological/doctrinal section of chapters 1-3 with the practical/duty section of chapters 4-6. He initially connected the two with the word “therefore.” Since all of this theology and doctrine is true, “therefore” live this way. This section opens with Paul reminding the believers at Ephesus to live “*worthy of the calling with which they were called.*” In essence he told them, “Live like what you are—children of God.” He made this appeal, urging them to live in such a way that brings about unity in the church. This walk is to be characterized by seven graces—lowliness, gentleness, longsuffering, bearing with one another, love, endeavoring to keep the unity, and peace. These graces must be present in the members of the church for there to be real unity.

In addition to this, Paul wrote about the ground of unity with another seven—seven ones. There is one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God. The unity among believers was to be based on doctrine and truth. I have been with groups who wanted to have unity for unity’s sake. This is uniformity, not unity. Unity comes from within and is a spiritual grace, while uniformity is the result of pressure from without. Our unity is based, then, on grace and truth.

Think about your church. How can you begin to practice the seven graces Paul mentioned in today’s passage? We did not go through each one in detail. Take time to read back through them and ask the Lord to enable you to practice these graces in the body. Look at the seven ‘ones’ and see the pattern of unity that God gives us. Pray that our church might truly be a reflection of God’s unity.

Day 2

First Read Ephesians 4:7-13

There is a transition between this section and the previous section. Verses 1-6 are about unity and what believers have in common. Verses 7-13 are about the differences among believers. This is about the special and unique gifts and offices God gives through the Holy Spirit to each one in the church.

Paul told the Ephesians that Jesus ascended into heaven and led sinful captives into freedom into the new captivity of Jesus Christ, God's Messiah. He first descended to earth and lived and died and was resurrected. He then ascended, taking liberated captives with Him into heaven. But He also received gifts and then gave gifts to men who are individual members of the church. The gifts that He gave are what we know to be spiritual gifts. In the New Testament there are three lists of spiritual gifts: 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 27-31; Romans 12:3-8; and Ephesians 4:11. These lists are not identical, so it could be that Paul did not name all the gifts that are available. Paul wrote that some gifts are more important than others, but that all believers are needed if the body is to function normally (1 Cor. 14:5, 39). Paul named not so much "gifts" as the gifted men God has placed in the church, and there are four of them. There are apostles, which are ones who are sent on a mission. There are prophets, not the kind who predict the future, but those who speak forth the word of God. There are evangelists, who proclaim the good news or who evangelize, and there are pastors and teachers. This seems to indicate one office in the church which has the responsibility of shepherding and teaching.

Now God was very intentional in the giving of the gifts. He gave them for a purpose. They were given first to equip the saints. The gifts were given for teaching, feeding, and shepherding the people so that they would be equipped. Secondly, the equipping was so that the people could do the work of the ministry. The third purpose of the gifts was that the church would be edified or built up. All of these gifts provide encouragement to build up the body. And lastly, that there would be unity in the body.

God has chosen, called, and equipped the body so that we might be to the praise of His glory. The church is not about us or any particular individual but about God and His glory. He gifted us so that the church can become all He intended. Thank God for what He has done and the wonderful blessing of His call and His gifts. We are blessed!

Day 3

First Read Acts 20:17-32

This is the day we see how this week's passage connects to the gospel message. We also studied this passage on two days in week 55. God gave to the church certain gifts and with these gift, He also gave certain offices or servant-leader responsibilities. One of those is that of pastor/teacher. This appears to be the office of pastor with the responsibility of shepherding and teaching the Word. On this occasion of meeting with the Ephesian church leaders, Paul is on his journey to Jerusalem. In Paul's travels he was on his third mission trip visiting and strengthening the churches. He was now heading for Jerusalem. On his way he sent word to the elders of the church at Ephesus to meet him in Miletus.

Paul's address to the Ephesian leaders was unique in that it revealed Paul the pastor, rather than Paul the evangelist or Paul the defender of the faith. This message enables us to get a glimpse of how Paul ministered in Ephesus for three years.

Paul wanted to make sure that the pastors did not lose sight of the task of preaching and teaching the gospel. Paul, in this farewell address to the Ephesian church leaders, was sharing his heart (and, for me as a pastor, the picture of a pastor's heart).

He shared that his motive was "serving the Lord with all humility with many tears and trials." Paul was doing what he was doing because he believed it was God's call and he was serving God. He would press on no matter what happened, even tears and trials, in order to accomplish what God had called him to do. He was encouraging these pastor/leaders to have the same motive.

He had genuine concern for the people he served. There was a desire to see them repent and come to full faith in God. Paul preached, taught, and disciplined out of his concern for the people under his care. He was a true shepherd.

He was not concerned about himself. Instead, he went through all kinds of struggles so that he could finish his race with joy and complete the ministry he received from the Lord Jesus. A pastor must put the people he shepherds above himself.

His primary concern was to "*Declare the whole counsel of God.*" The Amplified Bible puts it this way, "*The whole purpose and plan and counsel of God.*" Paul was concerned with not taking scripture out of context but

being careful to connect the dots presenting all of scripture as a whole. In doing this he would prepare the people against the attacks of the wolves who would try to lead people away.

After being the pastor of one church for over 34 years I understand what Paul was saying. All of the teaching of scripture must be connected to Jesus. Only Jesus can save. Only Jesus can deliver. Only Jesus can lead people to victory. This is the work of a pastor—to connect the dots of scripture to Jesus and connect people to Jesus.

Day 4

First Read Ephesians 4:14-16

I have stood on a large cruise ship and looked out over the Atlantic Ocean in very rough waters with no land in sight. The water was dark and choppy. I cannot imagine what it would be like to go overboard, even with a life jacket. Paul gives a vivid picture of children in deep choppy water being tossed around by the winds. He said this is how we are if we are not rooted and grounded in the truth. There are many false doctrines floating around today, especially with the internet. There are people trying to pull believers to follow strange and foreign teachings that are contrary to the Bible.

What is the solution to this? I have been told that the way people are trained to identify counterfeit bills is to know what the real thing looks like and feels like. The same is true about the Bible and biblical doctrines. The more clearly you know the Bible and biblical doctrines the better equipped you will be to discern falsehoods and lies.

Personally, I believe the more connected to God and His church a believer is the safer that person is. Every believer needs to be connected to God through salvation, His church through fellowship, His Word through discipleship, His service through ministry, and His mission through outreach and evangelism. Now not only are we to be connected in this way, but we are to be connecting others in this way. Once again, the more connected believers are to God and His church, the safer they are. Believers need to be growing in maturity. This includes the maturity that comes through becoming like Christ. There is also the maturity that comes through stability as we grow in the truth of God's Word. In the body we also have the maturity that comes by being joined together in love. And there is the maturity that comes by cooperating with other believers.

I love God's church and am convinced that all people need what God provides through the gifts of the members of the body. Get connected to His church and connect everyone you can!

Day 5

First Read Psalm 68:1-20

Today we look at a Psalm and see how it connects to Jesus and the gospel. Paul made this connection for us by quoting Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8 and applying it to Jesus. In doing so, all of Psalm 68 becomes a connection to Jesus. Jesus was the one who first descended and also ascended. By doing this, He presented Himself as a victorious king who won a great victory. He descended and then ascended in victory.

Psalm 68 opens with a call to celebrate our joy and gladness by singing to God. This is a celebration of our great salvation. Jesus is our conquering king who first descended and then ascended for victory and to give gifts to men.

In Psalm 68:19-20 we read that David proclaims that God is our salvation. Now we fully understand this because we know personally that God has made His salvation personal for us in Jesus Christ, God's Messiah.

Remember in the Old Testament there was not church or the concept of a church. Paul wrote that the church is a mystery. That means it was not known before, but now that Jesus has come it has been made known. It is a wonderful thing to read in the Old Testament about Jesus and salvation. But how rewarding it is to have the dots connected in Jesus!

Give thanks to God for the incredible perspective we have to read and study His Word.

What an amazing thing we have been experiencing for nearly three years. I will never be the same again but at some point I am eager to begin again. We made some big jumps and missed a lot.

This quarter we made the leap from the appearances of Jesus after the resurrection and the restoration of Peter to Pentecost and the explosion of the church onto the scene. We traveled with Paul on his missionary journeys and his relationship with the churches he started and the letters he wrote to some of those churches.

The last volume (6) will continue with Paul's writings and his challenge to the churches. We will wrap it all up with the glorious appearance of Jesus at the end of time as we know it and what heaven will be like. I certainly look forward to concluding this journey. If the Lord carries I look forward to doing it again in the not too distant future.

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