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**December 1, 2020**  
**UNFAILING LOVE**

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 12-14

“Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (1 Corinthians 13:7)

Our world is so confused when it comes to love. Too many people have fallen for the lie that love is a feeling. Something you can fall in and out of. Something disposable. Something that comes and goes. We see it all the time when celebrities break up. When cultural influencers announce their separations on social media. They still “love” each other but their love is not strong enough to overcome their differences. Their love is not strong enough to overcome their infidelities. Their love is not strong enough to hold them together.

To many people have fallen for the lie that they must “love” themselves first. To do anything else is to subject oneself to abuse or dysfunction. The idea of sacrificing oneself daily for another human being. Putting that person’s needs above one’s own is anathema in our culture. Love must be “self-serving.” Love must lead to “self-actualization.” Love must demand that others love us the way we love ourselves.

Too many people have fallen for the lie that “love” is the same as sexual attraction. Everything is hyper-sexualized in our culture and to deny our sexual attractions is now considered harmful. We are warned it might lead to depression and suicide. If we fail to affirm the sexual attractions of other people - no matter how disordered - we are hateful and bigoted and phobic.

Love has become a false god in our culture. A brutal tyrant with an insatiable appetite. He demands complete obedience and blind loyalty. His corrupting influence is now being felt in our schools and communities. In our courts of law and state houses. Even many churches are bowing at his altar. The results are devastating.

The Bible is clear...God is love, love is not God. It's a critical distinction. God is love. God demonstrates His great love in the sending of His Son. God shows us what love is by sacrificing Himself in our place. God's love is completely selfless. It puts our needs above His own. It is solely focused on the good of the “other.” It is not self-serving. It is not possessive. It is not resentful. It is not prideful. It keeps no record of wrongs. It patiently endures all for the sake of all.

God's love bears all things. Even you. Even me. All of us are sinners. We are enslaved to our desires. We do the things we don't want to do and we don't do the things we do want to do. We can't help ourselves.

God's love believes all things. I have people in my life that I dearly love. They tell me they no longer believe in God. My response is always the same. “God believes in you.” God's love can do no different. He sees each one of us as we ought to be. As He created us to be. As He redeemed us to be. And He longs for us to turn and embrace Him.

God's love hopes all things. God will never give up on you. God will never stop pursuing you. God is relentless in the chase. His love drives Him. His great desire is that all should be saved and come to a knowledge of His truth.

God's love endures all things. All of us are at war with God on some level. We rebel against His will. We reject His way. Our hearts are corrupt and deceitful and full of pride. They are always pulling us to go our own way. Do our own thing. Take our destiny into our own hands. God's love endures our fits and starts. Our fears and failures. Our mistakes and missteps.

God's love never fails. It will never fail you. It will never fail me. It will never fail the world. God's love is enough. It died on a cross to satisfy the demands of justice. It willingly and joyfully took our place. Endured the punishment we deserved. Paid the price for our sin. God's love would not stop until the work was finished. Until every last sin was wiped away. This is the love of God, friends!

Do you know you are loved by the God of the universe? Do you walk in His love? Rest in His love? Are you confident in His love? We aren't talking about a feeling here. We are talking about an objective reality that is true whether we know it or not. Believe it or not. Understand it or not. Feel it or not. God's love is the deepest, most profound truth undergirding the entire universe. His love is the foundation of all creation. His love provides meaning and purpose to human life. It is the telos or goal of our existence. Embracing this love is what gives us peace. Peace with God. Peace with others. Peace with ourselves.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Corinthians 15-16

**December 2, 2020**  
**THE HEART OF CHRISTIANITY**

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 15-16

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.”  
(1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

Boil the Christian faith down and what do you get? A man hanging on a cross, buried in a tomb, rising from the grave three days later. This is the heart of our faith. Without it, we preach in vain. We pray in vain. We live in vain. Without the death and resurrection of Christ, we are fools. We would be better off to eat and drink and party and make the most out of life because death wins. Literally everything rests on this fundamental truth...Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again.

This is what sets Christianity apart from all other religions on the face of the earth. It's what makes us unique. It's what makes us different. It's what makes Christianity true. We preach a crucified Lord and a Risen Savior. No other faith tradition makes anything close to the same claim. Sure, we might share the same moral code. Their gods might have some of the same attributes as our God. Their worship might look strikingly similar in terms of music and prayer. They might be good people with great families who live wholesome lives. They might make positive contributions to our society. But if they do not believe in the literal, historical, bodily death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; then their preaching is in vain. Their faith is in vain. They are still enslaved to their sins. Their dead are eternally lost. All because they are found to be misrepresenting God by denying the glory of His one and only Son.

Paul is very clear. The physical death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is THE essential cog in our faith. It is the key to unlocking saving faith. It is the lens through which we now see all of life. It is the cipher that cracks the code of the Bible. Christ has been raised as the firstfruits of the resurrection. He is the foretaste. The forerunner. The first to be raised so that He can go before us and prepare the way. His physical body was laid into the ground perishable, dishonored, and weak. It was raised imperishable, glorious, and in power! He is the first to be changed. The first to be transformed. The first to be raised. By His resurrection, we know death has lost! Sin has been defeated! The works of the evil one destroyed! The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is nothing short of the total and complete victory of God!

And it is God's victory that makes us immovable. Steadfast. Always abounding in His work. It is God's victory that makes us watchful. Firm and strong in the faith. Persistent in love. It is his complete confidence in God's victory that gives Paul courage to face the stones at Lystra. The beatings and imprisonments. The shipwrecks and torments. Paul considers all of it loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ! What about you, my friend? Do you share this same confidence in the death and resurrection of Jesus? Do you place your trust in a Risen Lord and Savior? Has He become the filter for your life? The lens through which you now see the world?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Corinthians 1-4

December 3, 2020  
JARS OF CLAY

Readings for today: 2 Corinthians 1-4

I have this clay pot on my desk. A friend gave it to me years ago. She bought it in Egypt from a local vendor who literally spent his days forming these vessels out of clay and letting them bake in the sun before taking them to market to sell. It's simple. Ordinary. Fairly fragile. I imagine if I used it day in and day out like most people over in that part of the world, it would become chipped and cracked. Eventually it break apart altogether.

I think about this pot every time I read Paul's words to the Corinthians. "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us." (2 Corinthians 4:7) You and I are no different than the pot that sits on my desk. Simple. Ordinary. Fairly fragile. It doesn't take much to wound us. Hurt us. Chip us. Crack us. Break us. And yet God in His unsurpassed wisdom and grace has entrusted to us the treasure of the gospel. Through His Spirit He has deposited Christ into our hearts. And we now carry Him with us wherever we go.

There is a lot of pressure in our world to be perfect. To never let anyone see you sweat. To pretend like we have it altogether. On the flip side, there seems to be just as much pressure to be "real" and "authentic." To publicly curate our brokenness on social media in service of self-promotion. Both views are deeply misguided because they both focus on the pot rather than the Potter. They focus on the jar of clay rather than the treasure hidden within. They both flip the script and ascribe power to the person rather than to God which is why all such efforts eventually fall apart.

We are weak and feeble. We are foolish and ignorant. We are anxious and afraid. Each one of our "jars" is chipped and cracked and broken in so many different ways. But when we see ourselves through the eyes of faith, we see past all the hurts, wounds, and scars to the treasure deposited within. We see the light of Christ shining through all our imperfections giving light and life and blessing to those around us. We understand that the "vessels" we inhabit are ultimately not what's most important. Rather it is Christ in us that is the hope of glory! So it doesn't matter what hardships we suffer or what injustices we face. We recognize this world has nothing for us. It is not our home. So we can spend our lives in service to Christ. We can wear these bodies out for the sake of Christ's mission in this world. We can exhaust our resources and our time and our energy. We can leave it all on the field so to speak, trusting there is a greater prize awaiting us in heaven. I love how Paul describes his own life, "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you." (2 Corinthians 4:8-12)

Paul gets it. His whole life has prepared him for this moment. All his training. Upbringing. Wealth. Power. Privilege. All of it is now poured out like a drink offering before Christ. He must die so others may live. He must give away all he has for the sake of those who do not know Jesus Christ. He must surrender all his needs, wants, and desires for the sake of the mission of proclaiming Christ. He understands the true worth of the treasure he carries inside and he lets his life become a living testimony to the surpassing power of Christ.

This is how the gospel spreads from one generation to the next. From one region of the world to the next. Through ordinary men and women who come face to face with the pearl of great price and sell all they have as a response. Ordinary people like you and me who grasp the infinite worth of the treasure we hold and do all we can to give it away to others.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Corinthians 5-9

**December 4, 2020**  
**RECONCILIATION**

Readings for today: 2 Corinthians 5-9

Reconciliation is a radical act in our day and age. We live in such a divided world. We are divided along social lines. Political lines. Ethnic lines. Sexual lines. Economic lines. Educational lines. Religious lines. All of it taking on a righteous fervor as each person seeks to defend their position over and against their perceived enemies. Differences of opinion devolve into personal animosity. Policy differences become litmus tests for morality. Ideological purity must be maintained at all costs lest one fall down the slippery slope to compromise. Social media throws gasoline on this dumpster fire on a daily basis. Cable “news” organizations fill their programming slots with partisan opinion shows designed to reinforce confirmation bias. It even filters down to the personal level in our day to day relationships. I cannot begin to count the number of times I’ve had someone tell me about a situation where their feelings were hurt and rather than follow the gospel-call to forgive and reconcile, they began attacking the other person’s character. Impugning motives. Words like “betrayal” and “wounded” and “abuse” thrown around far too casually. All in an attempt to justify cutting that other person out of their lives.

None of us are immune to these cultural pressures. None of us have clean hands when it comes to this issue. Reconciliation is hard, hard work. And it is impossible without Jesus Christ. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.” (2 Corinthians 5:17-19) The Apostle Paul lived in a similar world. A world of great pluralism and diversity. A world full of political, social, sexual, and religious intrigue. A world where different groups literally came to blows, often in violent and brutal ways. Into this world, Paul believes God has sent His church. His people. And they have been entrusted with a very special task. Reconciliation.

What is reconciliation according to Paul? It is God reconciling the world to Himself. It is God laying down His life for us while we were still sinners. It is God making peace with us while we were still at war with Him. It is God sacrificing Himself for His enemies...namely you and me. Reconciliation requires we do the same. It requires us to relinquish our need for vengeance. It requires us to not count a person’s trespasses against them. It requires a conscious decision not to hold a person’s past actions against them. Most of all, it requires us to “regard no one according to the flesh”, meaning we no longer let a person’s political, social, sexual, or ethnic identity get in the way of a relationship. We love them as Christ loves them. Unconditionally. This doesn’t mean we try to “erase” their uniqueness. This doesn’t mean we try to “whitewash” or “homogenize” everyone. This doesn’t mean we make them become like us. No, we love them as they are. We love them where they are. We love them for who they are. Image-bearers of God. Born with a dignity that, while broken utterly by sin, can never fully be lost.

I can already hear the protests in your heart. What about an abuser? What about the man who murdered my child? Raped my daughter? Stole my life savings in a Ponzi scheme? What about the corporate criminals at places like Enron or dictators who use chemical weapons on their own people? Evil is legion in our world and you are suggesting we meet such evil with reconciliation and love? How weak! How stupid! Only an arrogant, white, privileged, cisgender, heterosexual, upper middle class male would ever say such a thing! And perhaps that’s partly true. I am fully aware of my cultural location. Fully aware I have never had to battle systematic oppression. Fully aware I have never suffered abuse. Fully aware I have never been the victim of a violent crime. But I have sat with many who have. I have

listened to their stories. Perpetrators and victims alike. I worked for two years in a maximum security prison. I know many murderers personally. I have seen their hate up close and personal. I have spent the last twenty years in ministry. Spent countless hours counseling with victims of abuse. I have seen their pain up close and personal. I have been overseas many times. Met survivors of genocide. Survivors of civil wars. Survivors of holocausts no one has ever heard of. I have seen life-threatening poverty up close and personal. I have stood at the mass graves. I have listened to the stories of trauma and tragedy. It is heartbreaking on a level I am at a loss to comprehend.

But I have also seen the power of reconciliation. I have seen it in the Gacaca courts of Rwanda where perpetrators of genocide confess their crimes, are confronted by their victims, and the local community is able to move towards healing and restoration. I have seen it in the church plants of Ethiopia where former tribal enemies become brothers and sisters through the saving work of Jesus Christ. I have seen it in the New Jersey State Prison where murderers received parole because the family of their victim was willing to forgive and reconcile. I saw it in a local church I served whose history included no record of African-American members though they were located in a neighborhood that was racially diverse. The courage of one young African-American man changed the hearts and minds of so many who had grown up with segregation. His Christ-like love overwhelmed their natural prejudice and they were set free. I have seen it in my counseling office as husbands and wives lay aside their “record of wrongs” and marriages are restored. I have seen it in my own life as my heart is shaped and formed by the influence of godly mentors from all walks of life. An African refugee pastor who has forgiven those who persecuted and imprisoned him. A female Old Testament professor who has successfully battled misogyny with forgiveness and grace. A gay man who faithfully serves the LGBTQ community though they consider him a traitor for choosing the path of celibacy out of obedience to Christ. These are just a few of my heroes. Just a few of the men and women who are taking God’s message of reconciliation to the world. I pray for the courage to do the same.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Corinthians 10-13

December 5, 2020  
CRITICISM

Readings for today: 2 Corinthians 10-13

I remember when George Herbert Walker Bush died. His passing signaled the end of a political era where one could disagree vehemently with the opposition and yet still grab a beer together after work. President Bush was well-known for his friendships across the aisle and, in particular, for the handwritten notes he would send to all sorts of people he had met throughout the course of his life. Though often lampooned when he was in office, he never seemed to let it get to him. Never retaliated in kind. Never lashed back. He clearly felt it beneath the dignity of his office. He was confident in who he was as a person and his record as a public servant.

As we read these words from the Apostle Paul today, it is important to discern his tone. In our current political climate of manufactured outrage, it would be easy to assume Paul feels as we do. It would be easy to read anger and rage into his words as he defends his apostleship. That would be a mistake. Paul says right up front that he is coming to them in meekness and gentleness. Though confident in his authority as an apostle of Christ, he will not “boast beyond limits” nor will he “overextend” himself to make his point. He calls himself a fool numerous times throughout the reading and mocks his former “credentials.” Over and over again, he reminds the Corinthians of his love for them. Reminds them of his great desire to see them restored in their faith. I love how he ends his letter, “Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.” (2 Corinthians 13:11) This is Paul’s heart on display.

So what is causing the rift between him and his Corinthian friends? Self-proclaimed “super-apostles” who seem to follow Paul around to correct his theology. They take it on themselves to serve as the theological police of the fledgling early church. They often preach that everyone must be circumcised. They attack Paul’s methods and speaking skills. They attack his character and reliability. They accuse him of being a conflict avoider. They claim to have the same mission credentials as Paul and a better spiritual pedigree. Their CV’s are filled, so they say, with church plants and signs and wonders and visions. This forces Paul’s hand. He has to do what he hates. He has to defend his apostleship by citing his own hard-won credentials.

Originally, Paul came to them in humility. He placed no financial burden on them, preaching the gospel free of charge. Living off the support of other churches, like the one in Macedonia which was extremely poor and yet very generous, he was able to live among them and teach them the good news of Jesus Christ. He didn’t lord his authority over them. He didn’t pass out his resume. He refused to promote his past success. Instead, he came to them in weakness. He shared in their sufferings. He intentionally relinquished his rights in order to build them up as a church. I love how he describes his love for them. “For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.” (2 Corinthians 11:2) “I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls...” (2 Corinthians 12:15) “For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. Your restoration is what we pray for.” (2 Corinthians 13:9)

Perhaps the most famous part of this set of readings has to do with the “thorn in Paul’s flesh.” Commentators throughout history have argued over what exactly Paul is referring to here. Is it an illness? An addiction? A persistent temptation? I believe Paul identifies the thorn when he calls it a “messenger from Satan.” Earlier in 2 Corinthians 11:13-15, Paul writes “For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself

as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.” The Greek word for “angel” can also mean “messenger” and it is the same word in both cases. Essentially, Paul believes that these false apostles are being used by God to keep him humble and utterly reliant on grace. God is using these evil men and their lies to protect Paul from pride and arrogance. He is using them to remind Paul of his weakness and dependence on Christ. He wants Paul to understand that the power he possesses does not come from him but from Jesus Himself.

I remember several years ago having a member of my congregation turn on me. For months she would write hate-filled notes and put them in the offering plate for me. When the deacons started to throw them away, she placed them in an envelope with my name on it. Soon that wasn’t enough. She began writing in our pew Bibles, calling for me to be fired. Attacking my character. Her anger and hate festered to the point that she even wrote a message on our Communion table cloth! It was brutal. We tried to talk to her. We tried to confront her. Even told her she would not be welcome if she persisted in her behavior. None of it deterred this woman. Eventually, she passed away. She certainly didn’t want me anywhere near her funeral. I remember the morning of her memorial service sitting in a coffee shop waiting for my next meeting. As I prayed for this woman and her family, the Spirit of God spoke to my heart. “I have used this woman to keep you humble. To remind you of your need to depend on Me. To teach you the truth about grace and unconditional love. You will miss her. You need people like her in your life to keep you trusting in the sufficiency of Christ.” It was a powerful lesson and one I will never forget.

How do you handle hate? How do you handle unfair criticism? Remember God uses all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. Rather than lash out, take a step back. What is God trying to show you? What is God trying to teach you? Is His grace truly sufficient for you? Is His power made perfect even in your weakness?

**December 7, 2020**  
**THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD**

Readings for today: Acts 20:1-3, Romans 1-4

“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” (Romans 3:21-26)

I cannot think of a more stunning statement from a former Pharisee of Pharisees. In his former life, Paul was known as Saul. He was a zealous for the Jewish faith. Believed with all his heart in the sufficiently of the Torah to lead one to righteousness. He was passionate about guarding the traditions that had been handed down. He trusted in Yahweh and believed he'd been set apart to protect the true faith. So up the road he went to Damascus. On his way to persecute Christians. Drag them from their homes. Bring them back to Jerusalem. Put them on trial for blasphemy. He was breathing fire against the followers of Jesus. And then he met the Risen Christ. Popular tradition tells us the experience was so powerful it knocked from his horse. The Bible mentions no such thing but clearly something dramatic changed in Saul. He went from being the Grand Inquisitor of the Christian faith to being her greatest evangelist.

What happened? Simply put, the very righteousness Saul had spent his entire life pursuing “manifested itself apart from Torah.” As a Pharisee, Saul believed in the resurrection of the righteous. He believed Yahweh would make all things right by raising those who were faithful from the dead. He believed one became worthy of resurrection through faithfulness to Torah or the Law. This had nothing to do with “earning” one’s salvation but was more about identity. How did one identify as a faithful Jew in a pagan world? When Saul met the Risen Christ, he was immediately confronted with a problem. If Yahweh had raised Jesus from the dead then, by definition, Jesus was righteous. And if Jesus was the Righteous One, then Saul had misplaced his faith. In the presence of the Risen Christ, it suddenly dawned on him that all the Torah and the Prophets - essentially the Old Testament - pointed to Jesus as Messiah! And this meant that all those who placed their faith - not in Torah - but in Christ would be “righteoused” or justified.

This changes everything for Saul. He changes his name. He changes the course of his life. He essentially does a 180 degree turn. What about us? Most of us are probably Gentiles, meaning we haven’t dedicated our lives to pursuing Torah-faithfulness. But all of us have dedicated our lives to something. It could be our jobs. It could be our lifestyles. It could be our kids. It could be ourselves. Whatever “it” is, it becomes a law unto itself. Subconsciously, we believe if we remain faithful to this “law” in our lives then we will be righteous. Then we meet the Risen Christ. And he displaces the “law” in our hearts. He becomes the only source of true righteousness in our lives. Faithfulness to Him means believing in His finished work. Trusting in the sufficiency of His grace. Surrendering our lives into His hands. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Frankly, all of us have sinned and fallen short of our own “law” as well. None of us is righteous not even in our own eyes if we are completely honest. All of us stand in need of the cleansing blood of Jesus Christ. All of us stand in need of the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross. All of us stand in need of the justification that can only come by faith. Thanks be to God for He has sent His beloved Son into the world for this very purpose!

Readings for tomorrow: Romans 5-8

December 8, 2020

## FAITH

Readings for today: Romans 5-8

“No unbelief made Abraham waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised. That is why his faith was "counted to him as righteousness." (Romans 4:20-22)

What is faith? A feeling? An emotion? Something you experience deep down in your gut? Is it an intellectual belief? Something you hold to be true? For Abraham, faith was “being fully convinced God was able to do what He had promised.” And what had God promised Abraham? A son. A son to be conceived and born through Sarah, his wife who was well past menopause. A son to carry on his line. A son who would be the first among many. A son whose descendants would eventually outnumber the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore. This was the dream of every ancient near east patriarch and it had been denied Abraham up to this point in his life. He despaired of it ever coming to pass. But now God entered the equation. God made a promise. God declared that he would have a son. With this promise, God guaranteed Abraham’s family legacy. It would have to be a miracle. Abraham was in his seventies when God made the promise. Sarah in her sixties. They would have to wait at least two decades for it to come to pass. But come to pass it did and Abraham never wavered in his confidence that God would be true to His Word. This is what faith is and why it was counted to Abraham as righteousness.

Now does this mean Abraham never had a moment of weakness? Never had any doubts? Never had any fears? Of course not! These emotions are all very real. At times, they drive us to take matters into our own hands. It’s not that we doubt God’s ability so much as we struggle to trust His timing. Struggle to see His purposes. Struggle to submit to His will. Abraham wrestled with these things as well and the result was Ishmael! But through it all, one thing remained true for Abraham. He remained fully convinced that God was able to do what He had promised. Abraham may not have fully understood. May not have known how God would bring this miracle to pass. Maybe he even believed God would use ordinary means like having sex with Hagar to bring His plan to completion. Whatever Abraham may have thought or felt, we know for sure he believed. And it is this unwavering belief in the promise of God that is counted to Abraham as righteousness.

What about us? In our reading for today, Paul contends it is faith that justifies us before God. It is faith that grants us access to God’s grace. It is faith that helps us persevere through suffering. Faith that sets us free from the bondage of sin. Faith allows us to set our minds on the Spirit which brings life and peace. Faith makes us fellow heirs with Christ. Most of all, faith gives us the confidence of knowing nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Do you have such faith? Are you fully convinced God is able to bring - and is bringing - these promises to pass in your life? Do you believe God when He tells you there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus? Or do you live a life - like so many do - of self-condemnation and fear? Do you believe God when He says there is nothing that can separate you from His love? Or do you find yourself feeling so depressed and ashamed that you think no one could or would ever love you? Do you believe God when He says the sufferings of this world are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in you? Or is the pain and heartache you’ve experienced simply too much even for God to handle? Do you believe God when He says He will save you from this body of death? Or do you feel trapped by sin? Enslaved by the lusts of your heart? You do the things you don’t want to do and don’t do the things you do want to do? These are just

a few of the important questions posed by the Apostle Paul throughout this section. He wants us to believe beyond a shadow of a doubt - as Abraham did - that God is able to do what He has promised!

This, friends, is the true message of Christmas. God delivering once and for all on all His promises! God breaking the power of sin. God defeating the power of death. God destroying all the works of the enemy. In Christ, God comes into this world to face down evil and suffering. In Christ, God literally takes our place, absorbs the righteous punishment we deserved, and atones for all our sin. In Christ, God makes peace. Offers reconciliation. Tears down the dividing wall of hostility and makes all things new. This is what God did and is still doing in our world. Thanks be to God for His great faithfulness!

Readings for tomorrow: Romans 9-12

**December 9, 2020**  
**HONEST QUESTIONS**

Readings for today: Romans 9-12

Today's reading is a challenging one. Paul is asking deep questions about the promises and purposes of God. So much of which is shrouded in mystery. So much of which we will never know this side of heaven. Has the Word of God failed? Is God unjust? How can God fault those whom He has not chosen? These questions are important. It is vital to wrestle with them honestly and vulnerably. True faith welcomes such challenges and doesn't settle for easy answers.

To begin, we must check our assumptions at the door. There are no standards of justice outside of God. God is not answerable to any human legal code nor does He subject Himself to human notions of universal fairness. God is the Potter. We are the clay. This fundamental principle undergirds everything Paul will say in these few chapters. The baseline for this discussion begins with God being God and human beings being human beings. The Creator is not the same as His creation. The creation is not the same as its Creator. There is a massive, ontological distinction between the two that must be maintained if we are to find our way through this quandary.

Second, God is God, He has every right to exercise His sovereign choice over all He has made. He chose Abraham and Sarah out of all the families on the face of the earth. He chose Jacob over Esau before they were born. He chose Israel over Egypt. Moses over Pharaoh. The full witness of Scripture makes it clear that God freely chooses some vessels for honor and some for dishonor. Scripture makes clear that God endures with patience the "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" so that He might "make known the riches of glory for His vessels of mercy." Over and over again, we see this played out in the Old Testament. There is simply no other way to honestly interpret it.

Third, what are we then to make of what's happening with Israel? God's elect? God's chosen? "To them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all..." (Romans 9:4-5) Furthermore, what are we to make of the Gentiles? God's non-elect? The pagans who've rejected God all their lives? Though they have not pursued righteousness somehow they attained it by faith! Does this mean God's elect have been rejected? By no means! "For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring..." (Romans 9:6-7) Ethnicity no longer matters! What matters is faith and God has maintained a remnant - of which the Apostle Paul is one - who have been saved by grace.

Fourth, God isn't done! God's plan for Israel is not yet complete! So the Gentiles who have been grafted into God's family should not become prideful or take God's grace for granted. "Remember it is not you who supports the root but the root that supports you." (Romans 11:18) Instead, they should wait and pray for the day when the partial hardening on Israel is softened because the full number of Gentiles have finally come in and God saves all of Israel.

How will that happen? Paul has no idea. He simply knows God is faithful. He will never abandon His people. His love is steadfast, loyal, and true. So at the end of all this deep wrestling there can only be an exclamation of praise. God is God. We are not. Thanks be to God! Or as Paul puts it, "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Romans 11:33)

Readings for tomorrow: Romans 13-16

**December 10, 2020**  
**CITIZENS OF HEAVEN**

Readings for today: Romans 13-16

Imagine you are the Apostle Paul. Writing to a group of Christians living in Rome in the late 50's AD. The Roman Empire has suffered tremendously since the reign of Augustus Caesar. Successor after successor has tried and failed to live up to his legacy. Political opposition is met with violence. The Praetorian Guard (think Secret Service of the first century) assassinates the very emperors they swear to protect. Tax rates rise and fall depending on public opinion polls. The borders of the empire are starting to crumble. The government is unstable and rulers are often certifiably insane. Nero rises to power. The initial signs are good. He seems to care about the poor. He often takes the side of the little guy. It looks like he's being advised well by Seneca. By all accounts, things are looking up. Then he murders his stepbrother. Murders his mother. Murders rival senators who oppose him. He initiates building projects that exhaust the treasury and overtax the populace. Rumors spread about the Great Fire that burned Rome for a week in July of 64 AD. Nero blames the Christians. He starts systematically persecuting them. He imprisons them. He throws them to the lions. He burns them alive in his gardens. It's a rough time.

Now imagine receiving this letter from Paul and reading these words, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed." (Romans 13:1-7) How would you respond? What thoughts would go through your mind if you were living in Rome under Nero watching the country descend into chaos? How would you feel about the "governing authorities" when you see them carrying your friends off to be tortured and executed for their faith? How likely would you be to submit to them? Continue to be a model citizen? Pay your taxes? Honor the emperor? Is Paul serious? Does he not understand who's in power here? Is he ignorant of what's actually happening on the streets of Rome?

Clearly, Paul understands. He will be imprisoned in Rome by 60AD himself, awaiting his eventual torture and execution. He has been flogged. Stoned. Beaten. Left for dead. He has been falsely accused. Falsely imprisoned. He knows what it's like to suffer and yet, throughout his own life, he seemed to model the very words he just wrote to his Roman friends. Jesus did as well. Jesus submitted himself to the governing authorities of this world. Herod. Pilate. The Sanhedrin. All driven by a lust for power. All corrupt to the core. And yet Jesus refused to call down legions of angels to fight at his side. He allowed his farce of a trial to stand. He refused to advocate for Himself before Pilate. He ignored Herod when he asked for a sign. Why? Jesus and Paul both understood they belonged to a Kingdom not of this world. They were citizens of a heavenly empire that transcended any earthly one. Their sole allegiance was to the God of the universe who had given all authority in heaven and earth to Jesus so there was no need to fight the power. No need to lead a rebellion. Because at best you would be replacing one sinful system with another.

At the same time, Paul is not advocating apathy. He is not calling for Christians to become doormats for the empire. What he calls for is a very proactive way of living that sets an example before culture and society of humble godliness even in the face of persecution. We are never to surrender the moral high ground! Never to surrender our deeply held Kingdom values! Never to give up Jesus for the sake of political expediency and gain! Why? First and foremost, we recognize all authority comes from God. It serves His purposes. God is able to bend both good and evil intentions to His will. God is able to use even the most corrupt to accomplish His plan. No matter what happens. No matter who gets elected President. No matter who serves in Congress. No matter who gets confirmed to the Supreme Court. ALL of them serve at God's pleasure. He takes them down just as easily as He raises them up. All of them rule under His sovereign authority and command.

Second, Paul understands the power of a godly witness. Even corrupt rulers cannot deny the power of the gospel. This was the genius behind the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. during the Civil Rights struggle. He believed by engaging in peaceful, non-violent protest of unjust laws that African-Americans and their allies would hold a mirror up to the corrupt soul of segregation. They believed their godly example would expose the evil legacy of slavery. They believed their political "enemies" needed salvation not destruction and this set them apart. The same was true for Nelson Mandela in South Africa. The same was true for Pope John Paul II when he led the Solidarity movement against communism in Poland. The same was true for Ghandi - though not a Christian, he based his resistance on the example of Christ - in India. In each and every case, these leaders led movements that transformed the course of nations and they were almost entirely based on the "good conduct" of their followers. "Do what is good and you will receive (the ruler's) approval, for he is God's servant for your good." (Romans 13:3) This is the power of a godly witness.

Finally, Paul elevates the cardinal virtue of humility. Submission. Subjection. Offering respect and honor to the office even if the person in the office is corrupt. Paul believes we should model our lives after Jesus. As he will write to his Philippians friends, Jesus is by nature God. But Jesus did not hold onto His equality with God. He relinquished it. He gave it up. He emptied Himself of all His divine rights and riches in order to become a human being. And not just any human being but a servant. A slave. But even then Jesus wasn't content. He took it one step further. Humbling Himself to death. The most humiliating death possible. Death on a cross. Paul sought to pattern his own life after Jesus and he calls all Christians to do the same. "Follow me as I seek to follow Christ." (1 Corinthians 11:1) Just as Christ rendered to Caesar what was Caesar's, Paul now calls on Christians in Rome to pay their taxes. Keep honest financial records. Respect the authorities. Honor the emperor. For in so doing, we honor Christ.

Of all the things we've read this year, this may be the most difficult passage for us to accept. Hate is the political currency of our day. Rage. Anger. Condemnation. Character assassination is our national pastime. We rejoice when our enemies fall. We defend our allies at all costs. We will sacrifice everything - including our Kingdom values - on the altar of political power and gain. Scorched-earth resistance is now the norm when the opposing party is in power and it is crippling our nation. And this is true for both Republicans and Democrats. Sadly, Christians seem no different than their non-Christian neighbors in this respect. In fact, we often seem to be out front leading the way and our blatant hypocrisy is on public display. Jesus weeps, friends. He weeps to see us so easily fall prey to the lust for power, influence, and control. He weeps to see us so easily sacrifice our witness and for so little. He weeps as He watches His people - citizens of the Kingdom of God - so easily and readily give up the moral high ground.

Thankfully, the truth of God remains. Though the grass withers and the flower fades, the Word of God is eternal. He is still on His throne. He still reigns from on high. He still sits at the right hand of the Father. He will bend even this time to His will. He will use even the corrupt politics of our day and age to accomplish His plan. There is nothing any human being can do that will thwart His purposes. So submit to the governing authorities, friends. Live godly lives before them. Witness to them by working for justice and righteousness. Pray without ceasing for the Spirit's work in their hearts. Give them the respect and honor due them by virtue of the office they hold.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 20:4-38, 21:1-23:35

**December 11, 2020**  
**A LIVING SACRIFICE**

Readings for today: Acts 20:4-38, 21:1-23:35

I've always been struck by the words Paul writes to his friends in Rome, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." (Romans 12:1) The phrase "living sacrifice" is the one that intrigues me the most. What is a living sacrifice? What would my life look like if it were offered on the altar to God on a daily basis? How is what I have to offer holy and acceptable? Unblemished like the sacrifices of the Old Testament? Isn't spiritual worship redundant? These questions hit me again as I read through our readings in Acts this morning.

The same man who wrote these words to the Roman Christians is the same man who now faces danger at every turn. He has not ceased to preach the whole counsel of God wherever he has gone. He has planted churches in cities all across the Mediterranean. He has suffered hardship and beatings and been left for dead. He has relinquished all for the cause of the gospel. And what has that gotten him? A broken body in constant pain. An itinerant life with no place to call home. A life of discomfort and uncertainty as he follows the will of the Spirit. And here at the end of it all, his reward is greater persecution. Greater resistance. A price on his head.

"And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God." (Acts 20:22-24)

Paul, indeed, is a living sacrifice. He has offered his body up to be tortured and killed for the sake of the gospel. He willingly walks into danger. He surrenders to the will of the Spirit. He knows his life is in God's hands to use as He sees fit. He has been warned. He knows the fate that awaits him in every city. Word has gotten out about this little Jewish-Christian preacher whose message stirs things up. The authorities are on the lookout. His enemies lie in wait. He has no refuge. No sanctuary. No safe place where he can go. Rather than lament his condition, Paul simply embraces it. He counts his life as nothing. His only goal is to finish his race. With every last ounce of strength, he will proclaim the gospel of the grace of God.

It's a deeply convicting and humbling read. It reminds me of the men and women I know in the Horn of Africa who take the gospel to some of the most dangerous places on the planet. They too are beaten. They too suffer hardship. They too are killed for their faith. But still they go. They refuse to let sufferings of this present life stand in comparison to the glory that will one day be revealed in them. Their names will never be known. They will not write any books. They will not speak at any conferences. They will not become social influencers. They simply go. They simply suffer. They simply die. All for the cause of the gospel of Christ. And they count it an honor to offer themselves as living sacrifices.

It's hard not to compare. My life is so easy. The comforts I enjoy so abundant. The challenges I face seem so small. My sacrifice so paltry. But then I look back at Paul's words again. What makes the living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God? Is it the cost? Is it the amount of suffering? Is it the burden borne? No. It is the mercies of God. By the mercies of God, I was born where I was born. By the mercies of God, I have been given the life I've been given. By the mercies of God, I face the challenges I

face. By the mercies of God, I am to offer what I have as a living sacrifice. This isn't about comparisons. This isn't about who's better or who's worse. Who's more or less faithful. It's simply taking what we have - by the mercies of God - and laying it on the altar. This is our calling and it is unique to each one of us.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 24-26

December 12, 2020

## TESTIFY

Readings for today: Acts 24-26

“And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.” (Luke 12:11-12)

I love the Apostle Paul. He is a man singularly devoted to the gospel of Jesus Christ. He is a man possessed by his love for his Lord. He gives up everything in order to know Christ and to make Him known. He lays aside his earthly ambitions. He lays aside his desire for a family. He lays aside his budding professional career. All so that he might take the message of Christ to the nations. When he begins this journey, he has no idea where it will take him. No idea that towards the end of his life he will be testifying in front of kings and queens and rulers and authorities. There were no guarantees he would make it this far. No guarantees he would even survive the journeys he's been on. No guarantees he would be listened to along the way. He simply did what he was called to do which was testify to what he had seen and experienced in the presence of the Risen Christ.

Testimony. We hear this word and we think courtroom. We think of witnesses on the stand. We think of them telling a jury or a judge what they have seen. Their role is not to decide the case. Their role is not even to ask questions. Their role is simply to share their experience. As Christians, we give the word another meaning. Testimony is what happens when we stand before our brothers and sisters - often in a worship service - and share what Christ has done for us. Now too often these stories become all about us. But the more powerful testimonies are ones that make Christ known to those who are listening. They focus on Him and His saving work in the life of an individual. They focus on His mercy and grace and the changes He has wrought.

Every Christian has a testimony. Every Christian has a story of how they came to faith. Every testimony is literally a miracle of grace whether you were saved as a young child or you were delivered in the twilight of life after years of rough living. When was the last time you shared your testimony with someone? Have you ever thought about how to do that? How to explain to someone what Jesus has done for you? As the passage from the Gospel of Luke makes plain, you never know when you will be called upon to share your story. You never know when an unbeliever might ask you why you live the way you do. Why you serve the way you do. Why you give the way you do. They might ask you personally. They might ask you over social media. They might ask you to share publicly. And we do not need to be afraid or anxious in those moments because God promises to give us the words to say.

I think about the various places and people with whom I have shared my faith over the years. I think of the early days in dorms on the CU campus or on Pearl Street when I would testify to Christ. I think of the hospital where I worked after college and the many times I was able to share my testimony with fellow employees, those who worked for me, and even those in authority above me. I think of the many times I was able to share my testimony at New Jersey State Prison with the guards and non-Christian inmates. I spent an entire year testifying to a Muslim imam as we both tried to convert one another! ;-) I think of the testimonies I've been able to share with the people in the churches I've served. I think of the testimonies I've shared around the world in places like Ethiopia, China, and South Korea. Always about Christ. Always about His saving work in my life. Always about what He's done for me. The focus always and exclusively on Him.

There have been times when I have been nervous. There have been times when I've been afraid. There have been times when I've worried over how I would be received. There have been times when I've failed to speak. But each and every time I've stepped forth in obedience to Christ's call, the Holy Spirit has more than provided the words I needed to say. Friends, I challenge you to share Christ with those around you who do not know Him this Christmas season. Testify to all He has done for you. Testify to His unconditional love. Testify to His tender mercies. Testify to His amazing grace. Our world is desperate for redemption and it can only be found in Jesus, amen?

December 14, 2020  
MISSION

Readings for today: Acts 27-28

A few years ago, a young missionary named John Chau was killed as he tried to reach an unreached people group with the gospel. His death kicked over a hornet's nest of controversy. Some saw him as yet another martyr to the cause of Christ on par with the Jim Elliott's of the past. Others saw him as yet another example of colonial Christianity seeking to impose his views on a tribe who clearly didn't want him on their island. The inhabitants of North Sentinel killed John Chau as he attempted to befriend them, bring them gifts, and, most of all, share Christ. Why the controversy? First and foremost, we live in a culture where evangelism is cast in a negative light. The idea that one person's views are superior in any way to another's is anathema. The Sentinelese had a right to be left alone. Their religious views are no one else's business. Christian missionaries should stay out. Second, we live in a culture where "Christian missions" have too often been used as a cover for Western European colonial expansion. The evidence is legion in Africa, Latin America, and other places around the globe. Western powers using the gospel as a pretext to overthrow governments, manipulate economies, and enslave entire people groups. Third, too many missionaries are naive in their approach. They don't take seriously the potential of introducing life-threatening disease to the local population. They don't take the time to understand the language or learn the culture or use intermediaries who are culturally closer to the unreached group to help make first contact.

By all accounts, John Chau truly made an effort to overcome these barriers and address these concerns. He spent a great deal of time in training. He trained his body. Trained his mind. Trained his spirit to endure the isolation he would experience should he make successful contact. He got the proper immunizations and quarantined himself to protect the Sentinelese from any potential disease. He studied their culture. Studied what was known of their language. He made multiple trips to the region to familiarize himself with the area. He made enough local contacts to provide transport. He clearly was not an agent of some foreign government seeking to extend their influence. Once the dust settled, the picture that emerged was that of an earnest, sincere believer in Christ who clearly felt called to reach one of the most isolated tribes left in the world with the gospel. Time will tell if his death will bear any fruit.

What does this have to do with today's Bible reading? I imagine Paul faced similar challenges in his own journey to Rome. I think about his encounter with the indigenous people on Malta. Having been shipwrecked in a storm, Paul escapes with his life along with the other sailors and soldiers who were aboard. They make their way to the beach where they were greeted with kindness by the locals. A fire was kindled. Food was probably brought. Paul even gets bit by a poisonous snake and survives! Eventually, they are taken to the leader whose father was dying of disease. Paul heals him. Word gets out. The people bring all their sick to Paul to be cured and this gave Paul an opportunity - though the passage doesn't make this explicit - to preach the gospel.

I imagine the same people who criticize John Chau would have criticized Paul as well. The only difference is enough time has past to see the fruits of Paul's labor. His efforts clearly succeeded. The seeds of the gospel he planted bore fruit. An empire was converted. The world was changed. But now Paul's come to the end. The race has been run. The cup emptied. He will be executed in Rome. The latest in a long line of first century martyrs who gave their lives for the cause of Christ.

What can we learn from the example of Paul? Or the modern day example of John Chau? First, we must have a passion to reach the lost at all costs. There is an urgency to our mission because eternity is

literally on the line. Christ Himself commanded us to make disciples of all nations. He told us we would be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, to the ends of the earth. This commission has never been revoked so we must be obey. Second, we must be willing to sacrifice comfort, safety, reputation, and resources if we are to accomplish this mission. Evangelism will not make us popular. Many will reject what we have to say. They will criticize us and call us names. They may accuse us of promoting white supremacy, neo-colonialism, etc. But we must fear God more than man. Finally, we have to be wise. We cannot confuse the mission with the methods. We cannot be so wed to a certain way of doing things that we make it more important than the mission itself. We must be culturally sensitive and aware. We must be willing to relinquish power and authority to indigenous leadership. We must be humble in our approach and not pretend we have all the answers. We must study the culture we are trying to reach diligently and honor as much as we can. We must openly acknowledge when we make mistakes and ask for forgiveness.

The 29th chapter of Acts is being written even as we speak...what stories will be told about your mission work?

Readings for tomorrow: Philippians 1-4

**December 15, 2020**  
**MIND OF CHRIST**

Readings for today: Philippians 1-4

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus...” (Phil. 2:5) This is often what’s missing from the church today. The mind of Christ. Could you imagine what would happen if the people of God who profess to believe in the authority of the Word of God simply put these words from Philippians 2 into practice? If we truly did nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit? If we truly counted others more significant than ourselves? If we truly grasped the mind of Christ that is ours already through faith in Jesus?

Sadly, we do not take God at His Word. If we are honest, most of what we do is for selfish purposes. Self-protection. Self-provision. Selfish ambition. We do not believe others are more significant than ourselves because we are swimming in a culture that is addicted to self-promotion. Why is social media so popular? Because we can share our highlight reel with the world. We can be the hero of our own story. We can be center of attention. Why is social media so depressing? Because of the competition it invites as we scroll through our feeds and compare ourselves to our friends. Even those who trade in “authenticity” do so in a curated way. Meaning that even as they share their struggles and frustrations and brokenness, it is done in such a way as to draw attention to themselves.

Paul calls us to a different way. The way of Christ. And this way requires humility. It requires us to check all our selfish desires at the door. The pattern Christ sets for us is very specific and very concrete. Christ did not consider his status as God something to be held onto. Christ willingly relinquished all His divine authority and rights and prerogatives. Christ emptied Himself of His divine glory and power in order to become a human being. There is no greater example of humility than the infinite God of the universe limiting Himself by taking on finite human flesh. And not just any flesh but the flesh of a servant. And there is no greater act of humility than this same God becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. The humiliation of Jesus stands in direct contrast to the prideful self-absorption of our culture. And it is something all who claim to follow Jesus must embrace.

Paul embraced the way of Jesus. This letter comes at the end of Paul’s life. He’s in prison in Rome awaiting his trial and probably execution. As he reflects back on all he has experienced, what is his great desire? Christ. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else.

“To live is Christ and to die is gain.”

“Whatever gain I had, I count as loss for the sake of Christ.”

”I count everything as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ.”

Even my sufferings are nothing compared to what I have gained in Christ.

“I have no righteousness to call my own but only that which comes through faith in Christ.”

All my strivings cease as I “press on toward the goal of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

I want to know nothing else but “Christ and the power of His resurrection.”

Does this mean we should abandon everything we have and go live as hermits in the wilderness? No. Some have actually made this attempt but even there pride found them. Even alone in the wilderness, they could not escape themselves. The only answer, friends, is to intentionally and relentlessly set your mind and heart on Christ. Through daily prayer and meditation on Scripture. Weekly corporate worship with your church family. Active participation in some kind of small group where you can share openly, honestly, and vulnerably and be held accountable for your spiritual growth. Finding a place to serve Christ through the local church. These are the means of grace God uses to shape our hearts and minds over a lifetime.

The mind of Christ is not abstract, friends. It doesn't magically appear. It takes concrete form as we walk in relationship with one another and with God. Humility is something that must be practiced because the inertia of our lives is always towards self. Our hearts are inwardly inclined. We navel gaze as a general rule. To get from here to there requires us to die to self on a regular basis. Crucify the sinful desires of our flesh. Empty ourselves of all our foolish pride, ambition, and conceit. Only as we believe the Jesus Truth and follow the Jesus Way will we obtain the Jesus Life.

Readings for tomorrow: Philemon 1, Colossians 1-4

**December 16, 2020**  
**CHRIST-LIKE RELATIONSHIPS**

Readings for today: Philemon 1, Colossians 1-4

What makes a relationship Christian? What is God's design for relationships within His family? How are we as brothers and sisters in Christ to act towards one another? I think about these things a lot. Mainly because I am a pastor and I have a responsibility to help the people I serve grow in their relationships with Christ and with each other. I have often sat down with couples in marriage counseling to talk about the difference between a "Christian marriage" and two Christians getting married. I have often sat down with friends who are struggling to help them see the difference between a "Christian friendship" and two Christians who happen to be friends. I have spent a great deal of time with churches helping them navigate conflict and division and almost inevitably one of the key questions comes down to do they want to be a "Christian church" or just a bunch of Christians gathering together for worship, mission, fellowship, etc.

You might be asking yourself what's the big deal. It may feel like I'm making mountains out of molehills or playing with semantics. But listen to Paul's words to his Colossians friends and ask yourself if these same qualities mark your relationships.

"And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light." (Colossians 1:9-12) What do you pray for when you pray for your spouse, children, extended family, friends, or your church family? Do you pray like Paul prays? Do you pray for them to be filled with God's wisdom and understanding? Do you pray for them to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord? Do you pray for them to bear godly fruit in their lives? Do you pray for them to be strengthened and filled with joy? One could easily spend a lifetime simply praying this one prayer from the Bible for those they know and I believe God would honor it in an amazing way.

"For I want you to know how great a struggle I have for you and for those at Laodicea and for all who have not seen me face to face, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." (Colossians 2:1-3) Do you struggle and wrestle over those you love? The choices they make? The decisions they face? The consequences they have to deal with? Do you long for their hearts to be encouraged? For them to be knit together with you in love? For everyone to reach the full assurance of understanding and knowledge of the mystery of God which is Christ Jesus revealed in human flesh? Do you find yourself weeping over the lost? Crying out to God on behalf of those who are suffering? Doing all you can to come alongside those who are hurting? We live in a world that encourages you to "cancel" those with whom you disagree. Dismiss those who think or act differently than you. Separate from those who have hurt you. Jesus calls us to a different way. He calls us to abide even as He abides. He calls us to remain faithful even as He is faithful. He calls us to forgive and reconcile even with those we once named enemies.

"Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." (Colossians 3:2-3) It is so easy to let our minds be shaped by the things of this world. Politics. Economics. Prevailing cultural norms. Different philosophies. Jesus calls

us to set our minds on heavenly things. Heavenly realities. Heavenly truth. He calls us to transcend. To rise above the futile ways of this world. We have died with Christ. Our lives are hid with Christ. Our eternities secure in Christ. So we cannot submit again to the world's yoke of slavery.

"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (Colossians 3:12-17) In the final analysis, living a Christian life is not what you are against but what you are for. It's not just about giving up but putting on. It's not just about relinquishing and letting go of sin as much as it is about taking up and clinging to Christ. Christian relationships require intentionality. They require a pro-active approach to one another. If we are to live in authentic Christian fellowship, we must take on attitudes like compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience. We must bear with one another because none of us is in the exact same place in life. We must practice forgiveness and extend grace. We must be people of peace refusing to engage in the perpetual outrage cycle that consumes so much of our time these days. Above all, we must put on the love of Christ.

Friends, this world will do all it can to pull us apart. It exerts a powerful centrifugal force through the political and cultural wars of our time. The enemy loves nothing more than to sow seeds of division, disunity, and separation in the family of God. Don't give Him a foothold! The love of Christ is strong enough to hold us together! If He truly is at the center of your life and the center of your relationships and the center of your church, you will find Him exerting a centripetal force that will keep you together.

Readings for tomorrow: Ephesians 1-4

**December 17, 2020**  
**TROPHIES OF GRACE**

Readings for today: Ephesians 1-4

Christmas is the celebration of the birth of God. The gift of God coming into the world. The Word of God becoming flesh and blood. The Son of God becoming one of us. I often wonder why God did it. Why did God come? Why did He send His Son? What was He hoping to accomplish? What did He hope to gain by humiliating Himself to the point of becoming a human being? Then I read these beautiful words from the Apostle Paul...

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” (Ephesians 2:4-7)

When I was young, I had a bookshelf on which I displayed all my trophies. I had a letter jacket on which I displayed all my high school athletic accomplishments. I framed academic certificates for making the honor roll. I wore my Boy Scout uniform with pride because of the many patches and badges it displayed, each representing some kind of achievement including my Eagle. Now I am older but my tendency to put my achievements on display has not diminished. I sit in my office and to my right on the wall are all the degrees I’ve earned as well as my certificate of ordination and the senior preaching award I won at Princeton. All of us have a tendency to glory in our achievements and there’s nothing wrong with being proud of the hard work you’ve put in or the accolades you’ve received along the way.

At the same time, we must also recognize success is fleeting. My old trophies are gathering dust in my parent’s basement somewhere. My letter jacket and Boy Scout uniform hang in a dark corner of my closet. I can’t for the life of me find a single honor roll certificate and I barely glance at the degrees on my wall. These things come and go. They are like the grass that withers or the flower that fades. Even if I were to spend my whole life conquering one mountain after another, eventually my strength will fail. Eventually there will be no more mountains to climb. No more prizes to win. What then?

Thankfully, life is more than what I achieve. Life is more than what I earn. Life is more than what I accomplish. Life. True life. Eternal life is a gift from God. It is unearned. It is unmerited. It is undeserved. While we were dead in sin, God made us alive. How? By His great mercy. Why? Because of the great love with which He loved us. For what purpose? To put us on display as a trophy of grace. Do you realize God’s intent is to show you off for all eternity? Do you realize His greatest joy. His greatest delight comes in saving you? Do you understand that God has raised you up and seated you at His right hand so that in the ages to come all will see the immeasurable riches of Christ in you? Forget the plastic trophies we grasp so tightly! Forget the moth-eaten letter jackets and Boy Scout uniforms! Forget the degrees that fade! My life is a trophy of grace! My life is exhibit one of God’s mercy! My salvation is God’s achievement that will go on display for all eternity...for all to see...all for His glory!

Readings for tomorrow: Ephesians 5-6, Titus 1-3

**December 18, 2020**  
**EXPERIENCING CHRISTMAS**

Readings for today: Ephesians 5-6, Titus 1-3

“I cannot wait for Christmas!” How many of us have expressed that sentiment? Especially this year! When we were young, it probably had to do with getting more presents. But as we get older, the sentiment expresses some of the deepest longings of our hearts. We wish there was more kindness in the world. More gentleness. More compassion. As we feel the effects of the social distancing and isolation from COVID, we wish we could spent more time with friends and family and those we love. We wish we could experience more of the beauty that makes up the magic of this particular season. Perhaps most of all, we wish we could connect with God every day like we do when we sing “Silent Night” while holding candles with hundreds, perhaps thousands of other voices at the foot of the manger. In that moment - and perhaps only for that moment - the cares and worries and struggles and heartaches of this world are forgotten as we focus in on the Christ child.

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people...” Paul’s talking about the miracle of Christmas. He’s not only talking about what happened but why it happened and how we can experience a bit of Christmas every single day of our lives. Jesus came to bring salvation to all people. And part of His great salvation plan - the plan that was unveiled for all to see that first Christmas night in Bethlehem - is to train us to live godly lives in this ungodly world. Train us to be little lights in the darkness of our world. Train us to cling to hope amidst the hopelessness and despair of our world as we wait for the day of Jesus’ Second Coming. The Second Advent. The Day the promise of Christmas will be finally and completely fulfilled.

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.” (Titus 2:11-14)

What does it mean for us to experience Christmas on a daily basis? What would it look like to lay claim to the grace God offers us in Jesus Christ each and every day? It has to do with living a godly life. And what is a godly life according to Paul? It is self-controlled. Good and upright. Pure and holy. Notice he does not say “perfect.” We are never perfect this side of heaven but Christmas stirs in us the hope that one day Jesus Himself will come. He will redeem us and our world from all lawlessness and sin and evil and death. He will purify us once and for all as He ushers us into His Kingdom. The Kingdom He’s been preparing for us from before the foundations of the world.

The reality is we can be kind in this world. We can be gentle. We can be compassionate. We can make more time for friends and family and those we love. We can experience the beauty of God’s creation every day in a sunrise or hiking up a 14’er or fishing a mountain stream. We can give gifts year round and seek to bless those around us. We can gather for worship every single Sunday with God’s people and sing songs of deliverance and praise to our God. These are things we can do. Even here. Even now. Even in the midst of a global pandemic. Nothing stops us. Nothing keeps us from intentionally living with the “Christmas spirit” year round.

Think of the witness it would be if Christians were truly “zealous for good works.” If we were truly passionate about the works of God. Think of how it would change our neighborhoods if we started con-

necting with people even in a socially distanced way? Think about how it would change our work environments if we got there just a little early to make the coffee or sent out a few thank you notes to the rest of the staff? Think about how it would change the social fabric of our schools if Christian students made the intentional decision to love those who are marginalized? Those who are ostracized or bullied? Those who seem so alone? Think of how our churches would change if we extended grace to those who hurt us rather than judgment? If we forgave those who sinned against us rather than leave and head to the church down the street? Think of how the world would change if we saw our wealth and resources as tools in God's hands to bring life and light and health and hope in the name of Jesus? All this is possible for those who know and follow Christ.

If you've ever wished it could be Christmas every day, I have good news for you! It can be! Simply love and obey Christ. Live a life of praise and worship and joy before your Redeemer. Renounce your ungodly and worldly passions. Those things only get in the way. Instead, live your life for Jesus. Invite others to join you. Serve those whom Jesus' loves - the lost and the least in your community - and you will discover the peace the angels proclaimed at Jesus' birth.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Timothy 1-6

**December 19, 2020**  
**REAL LIFE, REAL FAITH**

Readings for today: 1 Timothy 1-6

Imagine you're Timothy. A young man (think teenager) who's been entrusted by Paul with the church in Ephesus. Ephesus is at the zenith of its power and influence. Made capital of the region by Caesar Augustus, it is a center for learning and commerce. It is home to one of the seven ancient wonders of the world. The Temple of Artemis draws thousands of pilgrims from all over the region. They come to worship. They come to trade. They come to make deposits at the Temple which serves as the largest bank in the area as well. The cult of Artemis created great wealth. An entire economy had grown up around the worship of their deity. The priestesses exercised great political and social influence. When your mentor Paul first preached here, he threatened the status quo. The gospel turned the entire social and economic system on its head and a riot ensued. And now the church he started is facing significant challenges. And you're the pastor. You're the one called to lead them in the midst of a thoroughly pagan and hostile culture.

Whenever the gospel penetrates a new region, one of the real dangers that pops up immediately is syncretism (e.g., the merging of older, pagan religious beliefs with the truth of the Christian faith). Some of it is brought on by the missionaries themselves as they try to translate the gospel into the local language and culture. Their own syncretistic ways are exposed as they realize how much cultural baggage they've brought with them. Some of it comes from the new believers as they struggle to leave their old ways behind. What often ends up emerging is a faith that is sub-Christian or pseudo-Christian and this is exactly what Paul is warning Timothy about as he begins his letter. "As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than the stewardship from God that is by faith...Certain persons, by swerving from these, have wandered away into vain discussion, desiring to be teachers of the law, without understanding either what they are saying or the things about which they make confident assertions." (1 Timothy 1:3-4, 6-7)

Why is this so important? First and foremost, eternity is on the line. The primary message of the gospel is "that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners..." (1 Timothy 1:15) Nothing can be allowed to get in the way of Jesus and those He came to save. Not the myths of the Ephesians nor the laws of the Jews. Second, what we believe shapes how we live. Throughout his letter, Paul will offer Timothy advice on a variety of subjects. Prayer. Leadership. Spiritual discipline. Teaching. Mentoring. Money. All of these are very practical, down to earth realities in the church Timothy serves. All of these probably caused Timothy a rash of headaches over the years. Most of the conflict in the church of today revolves around many of these issues. So not much has changed since the 1st century. And Timothy is young, as Paul points out. He is green. He probably doesn't have a ton of experience to fall back on as he looks to lead his congregation. So Paul encourages him to fall back on his faith. On his call to be a pastor. One that was confirmed by the council of elders when they laid hands on him. Timothy is not to let himself get bogged down but instead is to pursue "righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses." (1 Timothy 6:11-12)

These words are as much for us as they are for Timothy. Unity in the essentials. Liberty in the non-essentials. Charity for all. The reality is it is just as easy for us to get bogged down. We read a letter like this and we get wrapped around the axle on non-essential questions like who gets to serve and in what role or what people should wear to worship or the patriarchal/misogynistic nature of 1st century cul-

ture. We get so hung up on making sure the finer points of our theology align that we forget the major point Paul is making. “The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” (1 Timothy 1:5) Get this part right and the rest has a way of taking care of itself.

**December 21, 2020**  
**A LIVING HOPE**

Readings for today: 1 Peter 1-5

Perhaps you've heard the phrase, "Hope is not a strategy." I tend to agree with it. Even used it myself as I work with people who are struggling with addiction or deep life-change. The reason why it resonates is because we too often equate "hope" with wishful thinking or naive optimism. We connect "hope" with earthly desires or selfish ambitions. We too often associate "hope" with unattainable goals and dreams. Christian hope is different. It is grounded in the most fundamental reality of human existence...the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.

One of the most striking things about Christians throughout the centuries and even around the world today is their ability to persevere under persecution. I think of the men and women I know who risk their lives in places like North Korea, China, Ethiopia, and South Sudan to bring the gospel to their people. They are often imprisoned. Beaten. Abused. Sometimes they even are killed for the sake of their faith. I think of a man I once met who had been shot point blank in the temple. The bullet passed through his left eye, broke the bridge of his nose, and exited out the other side of his head. Somehow he survived and recovered and continued to preach! Incredible! How is such a thing possible? He had been born again to a living hope.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls." (1 Peter 1:3-9)

Friends, the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is our guarantee that everything we believe is true. The historical fact that Jesus rose from the dead forms the foundation of our faith. We do not hold to a blind faith. Our hope is not in vain. God has revealed Himself fully in His Son. He has made Himself known to the world through Jesus. In Christ, He has kept all His promises. And when we place our faith in Jesus, we are truly born again to a living hope. A hope grounded in the reality that the Risen Christ now lives and reigns in glory forever.

This reality should frame our entire lives. It should frame how we think, how we feel, how we act. It should frame how we plan and what we pursue. We have an inheritance - guaranteed by God Himself - that is being stored up for us in heaven! It is imperishable. Undefiled. Unfading. God Himself guards it by His sovereign power. Yes, we have yet to attain it. Yes, we will only get a taste of it in this life. Yes, there will be hardships and sufferings and trials and tribulations that may cause us even to question it at times. But if we endure. If we persevere. If we hold fast to our faith, we will find ourselves being refined as pure gold.

This Christmas season. In the midst of all the COVID restrictions. In the midst of the economic fears and hardships. In the midst of the mental health challenges. I pray you find your hope renewed. I pray

you look to the revelation of Jesus Christ in the manger on Christmas Eve and rejoice with joy over His birth. He is the goal of our faith. He represents the salvation of our souls. All that is His will one day be ours in glory. Believe this, dear friends, for it truly is the miracle of Christmas!

Readings for tomorrow: Hebrews 1-4

**December 22, 2020**  
**INCARNATION**

Readings for today: Hebrews 1-4

Incarnation. It's a big theological word that gets thrown around this time of year. It's a word we use to describe the mystery of God becoming one of us. The Word of God taking on human flesh. The Lord of the universe coming into our world as a helpless human baby. If we're honest, none of us truly grasp this mystery. None of us can wrap our minds or hearts around it. All we can do is gather around the manger in wonder and awe. It's a miracle to behold rather than understand. At the same time, we must probe the mystery. Faith seeks understanding. And the writer of Hebrews is a great guide.

Listen to how he describes the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. The miracle that took place that first Christmas. The wonder of the Christ child who lay in the manger.

"He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power." (Hebrews 1:3) Can you imagine? The same God who shaped and fashioned the world, can barely grasp Joseph's finger. The same God who upholds the universe by the word of His power must now learn his first words just like any human child. The same God who dwells in glorious, unapproachable light is born in the darkness of a peasant home among the animals. And yet, from the very beginning, there was something different about this child. Angelic choirs accompanied his birth. Shepherds left their fields to find Him. Mary and Joseph gazed in awe at their newborn child. Conceived by the Holy Spirit. Born of a virgin womb. God Himself clothed in human flesh.

"But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons and daughters to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering." (Hebrews 2:9-10) God subjects Himself to suffering. Why? What would ever prompt such a thing? Why not just eradicate suffering? Why not just do away with all death? Why not just step in and get rid of evil? God desires all to be saved and come to the knowledge of His truth. And His eternal plan from the beginning was to accomplish that salvation by becoming one of us. One with us. The One who created the angels subjects Himself to weakness. The One who was crowned with glory and honor subjects Himself to death. The One who exists in eternal perfection is made even more perfect through suffering. This was God's plan from eternity.

"Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted." (Hebrews 2:14-18) Through the sin of Adam, death entered the world. Death is the righteous punishment for sin. But it is temporary. It is not part of the eternal order. Death was never intended to reign forever. According to His sovereign plan, God enters the world at the right time. He becomes flesh and blood just like His children. He dies so that He might destroy the power of death once and for all. He literally becomes sin for us so that we might become His righteousness. Death is no longer to be feared. Death is no longer to hold dominion. Our great enemy is robbed of his greatest weapon. All by the One who became one of us. As the great church father, Gre-

gory of Nazianzus once put it, “That which is unassumed remains unhealed.” God was made like us in every respect. Every facet of human existence is taken up into God’s divine life. He suffered. He was tempted. And this is what makes Him our faithful high priest. He is able to help us because He understands us.

“Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:14-16) Ultimately, the only reason we can draw near the throne of grace with confidence is because of what Jesus has done. By coming into the world, Jesus opens a door into the very presence of God. He lights the way so we might find our way in. He raises every valley. He brings every mountain down. He makes the crooked path straight and the rough places plain. God did all of this in Jesus Christ in order to save to the uttermost those who would draw near to Him. Merry Christmas!

Readings for tomorrow: Hebrews 5-8

**December 23, 2020**  
**OUR GREAT HIGH PRIEST**

Readings for today: Hebrews 5-8

God is eternally consistent. From the beginning to the end of Scripture, a single story unfolds. God creates the universe and all that is in it. It is good. It is beautiful. It is right and true. He makes a man. Made in His own image. Places him in creation as a “priest” of sorts. One who exercises dominion over all God has made. One who keeps the Garden and makes it flourish. One who lives for God and His glory. But Adam fell into sin. The original high priest unfaithful. The impact is devastating. All of creation falls into ruin for lack of a faithful high priest who will present her to God holy and without spot, wrinkle or blemish.

Time moves on. Another priest is called. Noah. Set apart by God to exercise dominion over a new creation. The new world that emerges from the flood. But again, the high priestly line fails. Rather than be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth; they stick together. They build a tower. A temple to their own name. God looks down. Confuses their languages. Scatters them across the earth.

More time passes. Another priest. Abram. Called out of Ur, he will be the father of a new nation. They will become a holy priesthood. A people for God’s own possession set apart to exercise dominion over the earth. They are to walk in the light of God and teach the other nations to do the same. Once again, the high priestly line fails. They turn inward. They hoard the blessings of God. They become entitled. Prideful. They scorn the Gentiles they are called to serve. God punishes them and sends them into exile.

God goes silent. Four hundred years. God raises up yet another high priest. His only begotten Son. Jesus becomes one of us. Takes on human flesh. Assumes a broken human nature. He lives among us. Walks among us. Teaches us. Heals us. Suffers for us. Dies for us. He experiences all that human life has to offer. The good. The bad. The ugly. All so He can fully and rightfully represent us before the Father. At the same time, He remains God. His divine nature is never relinquished. So He can fully and rightfully take on the sins of the world. Jesus is the perfect high priest. His divine and human natures satisfying every aspect of the covenant God first made back in the Garden.

This is what makes Jesus unique. Superior to every angel and every prophet who has come before or after Him. He plays His unique, high priestly role even now on your behalf. He lives to make intercession for you. His sacrifice on your behalf has been accepted. You are set free. Receive this free gift from your high priest and place your trust and confidence in Him!

Readings for tomorrow: Hebrews 9-13

**December 24, 2020**  
**THE PROMISE OF CHRISTMAS**

Readings for today: Hebrews 9-13

It is fascinating to read the book of Hebrews during the Christmas season. To dive deep into the mystery of the incarnation. To grasp the full sweep and scope of God's salvation plan. Whoever the author of Hebrews is, he is intimately familiar with the Old Testament. He is also skilled at Jewish midrash which is an interpretive method that infused fresh meaning into the biblical texts. Jesus is his interpretive lens. He looks back on the ceremonial religious laws of the Torah and reinterprets them in light of Christ. The priesthood, sacrifices, and Temple are all reimagined. The high points of Israel's history are revisited as are the great heroes and heroines of the faith. It's like a fog has lifted for the author and they are seeing things clearly for the very first time.

Many years ago, I had LASIK surgery on my eyes. I have worn glasses since the fourth grade. My vision was terrible. I was as near-sighted as they come. Then I had the procedure. I remember walking out of the office and it was literally like scales had been lifted from my eyes. I could actually see things like the alarm clock in the morning or the individual leaves on the tree in my front yard. It was an incredible feeling.

I imagine the author of Hebrews felt the same way. You can almost feel the energy coming off the page. If you listen closely, you can sense his excitement and joy as he shares what he's discovered. Now it all makes sense! Now it all has become clear! This is why God instituted the sacrificial system and this is how God brings that system to completion! His own Son serves both as High Priest and Perfect Sacrifice. He bears His own Body into the Holy of Holies in the heavenly Temple and satisfies the just demands of God's Law once and for all. This is the mystery of salvation all of our forefathers and mothers in the faith looked forward to and now it is ours to see and to touch and to taste! The promised new covenant has been given. The new age inaugurated. The gates of heavenly Jerusalem thrown open. The angels gathered, along with the saints who have gone before us, to join the party. A gift is being offered. An unshakable kingdom that will never fall for its foundation is Christ Himself!

Can you feel him? Can you sense the passion behind his words? You can almost hear him crescendo as he brings his sermon to a close. "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. See that you do not refuse him who is speaking!...Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire." (Hebrews 12:22-29) I know I'd be shouting for sure! :-)

Friends, the Christmas gift God offers us in Jesus Christ is nothing short of heaven itself. This is what makes Christmas so meaningful. Yes, we'll get time with dear friends and family. In person or over Zoom. Yes, work slows down and school lets out. Thanks be to God because I know we're all exhausted! Yes, we give and receive gifts with glad and generous hearts. But the most important thing - the one thing we simply cannot miss - is the gift of Jesus! Through Him we receive eternal life in an eternal relationship with an eternal God who reserves a place for us in His eternal Kingdom. To Him be all the praise, honor and glory forever!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Timothy 1-4

**December 26, 2020**  
**TRAIL MAINTENANCE**

Readings for today: 2 Peter 1-3, Jude

I joined the Boy Scouts when I was young. By and large, I loved the experience. Loved to camp. Loved to hike. Loved all the adventures. One thing I didn't love was trail maintenance. Our troop adopted a trail down at Hankins Pass. Twice a year we would go there to perform maintenance on the trail. We would cut down trees. Clear any brush. Pick up any trash that had accumulated. The older boys and men would build water bars. Divert streams if necessary. Repair or replace bridges. It wasn't easy work. But because the trail received regular maintenance, it stayed clear and open and many got to enjoy it.

I often think about that experience when I reflect on the journey of faith. When I first came to Christ, it was like I had arrived at a brand new trail head. I was taking a path I had never trod. I was seeking a way where there had been no way. As I stared at the wilderness that lay before me, I realized I would need to cut a new trail in my life. The old ways simply wouldn't do. The old paths I had taken led only to dead ends. Jesus was calling me to a new way. His way. The only way. Listen to how the Apostle Peter describes it in our reading for today...

"His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ." (2 Peter 1:3-8)

The power to follow Jesus does not come from us. I did not have the strength to cut a new trail. I did not have the wisdom to know where to go. But thankfully, Christ Himself grants us His divine power to lead and guide us into all righteousness. In Him, we have everything we need that pertains to life and godliness. With Him at our side, we can cut a new trail of faith through this life. This will require effort. Peter makes this clear. We must make every effort to supplement the faith we've been given with virtue and knowledge and self-discipline and steadfastness and godliness and brotherly affection and love. These qualities come only as we continue to walk the path Jesus lays out for us. They come as we remain in step with His Spirit and maintain our walk before Christ. We cannot grow lazy lest our path become overgrown. We cannot neglect the ordinary means of grace like prayer and Scripture reading and corporate worship lest the path of faith become hidden to our eyes as the wilderness of sin closes back in.

Spiritual growth requires constant maintenance. It requires constant vigilance. It requires constant attention. You must go back over the path again and again and again to make sure it remains well-trod. This is true in every area of life. Habits form new pathways in our brains. The behaviors we engage in shape us as much as we shape them. The choices we make in life are often pre-determined by the path we find ourselves on. So here's the question for us as we come to the end of 2020 and look to begin a new year...are you on the narrow way that leads to Jesus? What new trails is Christ calling you to cut in the 2021? How are you preparing yourself? What's the first step? As you look back on the challenges

of the last year, what impact has 2020 had on your trail of faith? What maintenance do you need to do? What repairs will you need to make? What parts of your trail remain well-trod? As you walk back over the trail of your life, what parts of the trail remain familiar and comfortable? Every year represents a new beginning. A new opportunity to grow in our faith in Christ. Reading through the Bible each year is one way to keep our paths clear from the obstacles of sin. I hope you'll sign up and invite your friends and family to join us in the new year!

**December 28, 2020**  
**CHRISTMAS: GOD'S GREAT RESCUE MISSION**

Readings for today: 1 John, 2 John, 3 John

I love the opening to John's first letter. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete." (1 John 1:1-4)

John saw Jesus with His own eyes. Touched Him with his own hands. Heard Him speak with his own ears. He saw the Word of Life manifest itself in the Person of Jesus. He experienced Him. He knew Him. He testifies to Him. He dedicates his entire life to proclaiming Him to the world. Jesus was not a mystery to John. His life, death, and resurrection were real. Tangible. Concrete. His was no blind faith.

John understood why Jesus was sent into the world. John, perhaps more than any other New Testament writer, goes to great lengths to convince those to whom he's writing to believe. To place their faith in Christ. To trust in His saving death. This is what makes John's joy complete. The idea that anyone and everyone who reads his letters would enter into deep, intimate fellowship with the Father through the Son.

Christmas, according to John, is not overly sentimental. It is not so much about the birth of a baby as it is about the mission that baby was sent to complete. Jesus was sent to destroy the works of the devil. (1 John 3:8) Jesus was sent to be the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. (1 John 2:2) Jesus was sent to cast out fear by laying down His life in perfect love. (1 John 4:18) So yes, celebrate the birth of the Savior! Worship Christ the newborn King! But never forget what our King was sent to do. He was sent to bring life out of death. Light out of darkness. Love out of hate. In order to do that, He had to suffer and die. Become sin itself and descend into the eternal darkness of hell. He had to become the object of hate and rejection and humiliation. All of this, Jesus did for us. Jesus did out of love for us. Jesus did to save us. This is the true meaning of Christmas!

Readings for tomorrow: Revelation 1-5

**December 29, 2020**  
**SECOND ADVENT**

Readings for today: Revelation 1-5

As Christmas begins to fade into the rear view, reality begins to sink in again. We step on the scale and find we've picked up a few more pounds. We make trips to the store to return or exchange some of the gifts we received. We dread the arrival of the next credit card statement. The challenges of this past year add additional layers. Feelings of loss. Feelings of grief. Feelings of frustration over the restrictions that limited our celebrations. Perhaps it is appropriate that we begin Revelation as the year comes to a close. For the deepest longings of our hearts will always go unfulfilled this side of heaven. What we need is the second advent. The second coming of Christ. We look forward to the day when He comes again. The time when the living and the dead are raised. Heaven and earth coming together in consummate glory and the reign of God is established once and for all.

When will it happen? How will it happen? No one really knows and the Book of Revelation is notoriously difficult to decipher and understand. So here are some basic ground rules as you wade into the final book of the Bible. First, it is written by John while in prison on the island of Patmos. In order to get this letter out to the churches, John had to write it in code. The Roman authorities would have screened every piece of communication coming in and out of the prison so John had to be careful. Second, the writing is apocalyptic which is a very specific genre known to many in the ancient world. The fantastic images and visions are hallmarks of this type of literature. Third, the churches John is writing to are under persecution. They are facing the prospect of torture and death on a daily basis. This book is meant to encourage and equip them so they can endure in the rough days ahead. Fourth, many different Christians approach this book from many different interpretive angles. There is no one way to read this book and we want to make sure to extend freedom and grace to one another as we go. Wherever you land on the "End Times" theological spectrum, what's most important is that we all agree Jesus will come again.

So let me begin this home stretch with one of my favorite verses..."I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." (Revelation 1:8) God spoke the first Word in creation and God will have the last Word in consummation. He who began all things, will bring them to a close according to His will and good pleasure. God is. This is all we know. This is really all we can say. God stands outside the time and space continuum He created and will remain there looking in until He determines the time is right for His return. As John said in His Gospel, God revealed Himself to the world but the world did not recognize Him. He revealed Himself to His people, His family, and they rejected Him. When He comes again, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord. He will leave no doubt. "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen." (Revelation 1:7)

These are important words to reflect on as are the Spirit's warnings to the seven churches. They provide a spiritual barometer of sorts to help us discern how ready we truly are for Christ's return. Have we abandoned our first love? Are we facing persecution for our faith? What idols do we cling to? What sexual immorality do we engage in? Do we tolerate sin? Are we ambivalent towards the gospel? Is our faith lukewarm at best?

These are important matters for prayer as we close out one year and head into another. What lessons have the challenges of 2020 taught you about your faith? What spiritual commitments will you make in 2021 to help nurture your relationship with Christ?

Readings for tomorrow: Revelation 6-10

**December 30, 2020**  
**SEALED. SAVED. SENT.**

Readings for today: Revelation 6-10

One of the more common questions I get from the book of Revelation has to do with the identity of the 144,000 listed in Revelation 7. Those who take a “dispensational premillennialist” view of Revelation will argue that after the rapture of the church, the Holy Spirit will set apart 144,000 Jewish believers who evangelize the earth. Others will argue - like the Jehovah’s Witnesses - that this is a special group of believers set apart by God. My belief is that this number is symbolic, representing the full number of those who have been redeemed.

Again, this is muddy water we’re swimming in. Interpreting Revelation is difficult at best and there are godly men and women who take different positions on these issues. So it’s important to hold loosely here to our eschatological positions while we hold tightly to one another in fellowship.

Why do I believe the 144,000 is symbolic? Several reasons. First and foremost, is the fact that the number itself is highly stylized. Numbers are often used symbolically throughout Scripture to communicate a deeper truth. We have already seen from much of the writings of the New Testament that one of the biggest challenges facing the early church was the inclusion of the Gentile believers into largely Jewish fellowships. Remember, John is writing to actual churches who are facing severe persecution and he is seeking to encourage them. So it makes perfect sense to me that in John’s vision from God, an angel of the Lord seals 144,000. A number combining the 12 tribes of Israel with the 12 apostles of Jesus multiplied by 1000 - a number which the Bible often uses to describe a multitude too large to count. Indeed, the very next section talks about “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Revelation 7:9-10)

Second, the list of the tribes of Israel is unique and highly stylized as well. Judah is listed first, probably because Jesus is descended from this particular tribe thus giving him primacy over his older brother Reuben. Joseph is listed which is unusual as his place was taken by his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Levi is listed which is also somewhat unusual in that he is left out of some Old Testament lists since he didn’t inherit any land. Also, because room needs to be made for both of Joseph’s sons to be listed. Dan is left out, perhaps because his territory was the center of idolatry in ancient Israel. The point here is that this list is unique and actually not in alignment with Old Testament history which means a more symbolic, theological point is being made.

Third, this number reappears in Revelation 14. The 144,000 is described as the “redeemed from the earth” or “redeemed/purchased from humanity” which is universal language. Furthermore, if one is going to take a more literal view then one has to conclude that the 144,000 represent a special group of celibate, Jewish evangelists sent out to the earth. I tend to believe the language continues to be symbolic here with sexual purity representing the holiness attributed to those who believe - both Jew and Gentile alike - by the blood of the Lamb.

So what’s the point? Are we just arguing over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? I think the larger issue at stake here is this...in this world we will suffer tribulation. In this world we will suffer persecution for our faith. Perhaps we’ve escaped for a time in America but those days are rapidly coming to a close. Christian hegemony has come to an end in the West and we will soon find ourselves

faced with the challenges our brothers and sisters face around the world. John's Revelation will become even more significant in the years ahead not as an intellectual exercise as we try to "crack the code" but as an encouragement in our suffering for Jesus. Just as John wanted to encourage the early Christians to hold fast to our faith even under great trial, so he encourages us to do the same. We have been sealed as God's own people. We have been set apart to proclaim the excellencies of His grace. We have been saved from a crooked and perverse generation and now are sent out to be His lights in the world.

Readings for tomorrow: Revelation 11-13

**December 31, 2020**  
**NEW HEAVENS. NEW EARTH. NEW LIFE.**

Readings for today: [Revelation 11-22](#)

Admittedly, I'm cheating a bit here. You still have a few days to finish if you want to space it out but if you're like me, you're probably ready to get to the end. Usually by this time in the year, I'm a bit tapped out. At the same time, I'm excited for page one. To begin anew. To start afresh. There's something about a new year that stirs my heart. We will be reading through the Bible again in the coming year. We'll start January 4th. Make sure to jump in and join the groups forming on YouVersion or Facebook or simply keep coming to this page to find new devotionals as you read. However, before you go, it's critical to remind ourselves where all of life, all of human history, everything in this world is headed.

I love the image of a new heavens and new earth. Creation redeemed. Creation renewed. Creation restored to its original glory. God finally putting an end to sin and evil and death once and for all. This is the final fulfillment of God's salvation plan. It's the final act of the divine play that's been working itself out since the opening words of Genesis. What began in a Garden will end in a glorious City with Christ reigning at the center of it all!

First, the new creation will be like a bride adorned for her husband. I remember well my wedding day. My wife has never looked more beautiful. Never more pure. Never more perfect than at that moment she walked down the aisle. (I have never felt more unworthy either!) The same is true for the new creation when it comes. God has always intended to have a relationship with His creation. He desires depth. Intimacy. Complete and total transparency. The kind of relationship we can only dream about this side of heaven. The kind of relationship of which human marriage is but a foretaste.

Second, there is no Temple. God is fully present and we are fully able to bear His presence in our glorified, resurrected bodies. God literally takes up residence with us. He can be seen. Touched. Heard. He wipes away our tears. He heals our infirmities. He makes us finally, completely, and utterly whole. There is no need for sun or moon for God will be our light. There is no need for walls or guards for God is in perfect control. There is no need for judgment or punishment for all the nations of the earth will walk in the light of the Lord and will bring Him the worship He deserves.

Third, there are no divisions in the new creation. No human distinctions to keep us apart. Every dividing wall of hostility will finally be torn down. The New Jerusalem is built on the foundation of the twelve apostles and her gates represent the twelve tribes. In other words, God will gather His people - Jew and Gentile alike - together and make them one. He will gather His people from every tribe, tongue and nation before His throne and all that separates us will fade away like mist before the Lord.

It's a beautiful picture, is it not? Now here's the challenge. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we ask for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. We ask for the church to be a living reflection of this future glory. We ask for God's will to be done in our lives. In our community. In our nation. In our world. How are we living and acting and speaking and treating others so that they see the new heavens and new earth emerging in our midst? How are we presenting to the world a picture of heaven? How are we giving those around us a foretaste of what's to come through what we say and do? Christians are called to live as citizens of the Kingdom of God in this world. As you close out your Bible reading this year, I'd encourage you to reflect on the following questions...

- 1) Is there less of you and more of Jesus than when you began this year?
- 2) What parts of your life have been crucified with Christ and therefore no longer live?
- 3) How have you intentionally died to self and sought to live for Christ?

Becoming more like Christ is more a marathon than a sprint. It involves a long obedience in the same direction. I hope you've gleaned that if nothing else from your reading this year. God is at work across the centuries and across the generations. His primary desire is to make us more and more into the image of His Son. To restore us to the image He originally intended for us to bear. May the Lord continue His work in us and among us and through us until He comes again! Maranatha!