

November 2023

November 1, 2023 [Love God, Love Others](#)

Readings for today: Matthew 22:15-46, 23:1-39, Mark 12:13-44, Luke 20:19-47, 21:1-4, 13:31-35

November 2, 2023 [Be Prepared](#)

Readings for today: Matthew 24-25, Mark 13, Luke 21:5-38

November 3, 2023 [The Pain of Betrayal](#)

Readings for today: Matthew 26:1-5, 14-35, Mark 14:1-2, 10-31, Luke 22:1-38, John 13

November 4, 2023 [The Holy Spirit](#)

Readings for today: John 14-17

November 6, 2023 [Gethsemane](#)

Readings for today: Matthew 26:36-75, Mark 14:32-72, Luke 22:39-71, John 18:1-27

November 7, 2023 [Political Pressure](#)

Readings for today: Matthew 27:1-31, Mark 15:1-20, Luke 23:1-25, John 18:28-40, 19:1-16

November 8, 2023 [Unimaginable Suffering](#)

Readings for today: Matthew 27:32-66, Mark 15:21-47, Luke 23:26-56, John 19:17-42, Psalm 22

November 9, 2023 [Resurrection](#)

Readings for today: Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20-21

November 10, 2023 [Power](#)

Readings for today: Acts 1-4, Psalm 110

November 11, 2023 [Power on Display](#)

Readings for today: Acts 5-8

November 13, 2023 [Radical Transformation](#)

Readings for today: Acts 9-11

November 14, 2023 [Missions](#)

Readings for today: Acts 12-14

November 15, 2023 [A Life of Wisdom](#)

Readings for today: James 1-5

November 16, 2023 [Christ Alone](#)

Readings for today: Galatians 1-3

November 17, 2023 [Never Going Back...](#)

Readings for today: Galatians 4-6

November 18, 2023 [Essentials](#)

Readings for today: Acts 15-16

November 20, 2023 [Conflict](#)

Readings for today: Acts 17:1-18:18

November 21, 2023 [Empathy](#)

Readings for today: 1 Thessalonians 1-5

November 22, 2023 [Persecution](#)

Readings for today: 2 Thessalonians 1-3

November 23, 2023 [Spirit-Filled](#)

Readings for today: Acts 18:19-19:41

November 24, 2023 [The Commandment We Can't Seem to Keep](#)

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 1-4

November 25, 2023 [Let's Talk about Sex](#)

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 5-8

November 27, 2023 [Keeping our Bearings](#)

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 9-11

November 28, 2023 [A Humble Life](#)

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 12-14

November 29, 2023 [Resurrection](#)

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 15-16

November 30, 2023 [Eternal Impact](#)

Readings for today: 2 Corinthians 1-4

November 1, 2023
Love God, Love Others

Readings for today: [Matthew 22:15-46, 23:1-39, Mark 12:13-44, Luke 20:19-47, 21:1-4, 13:31-35](#)
([audio reading](#))

You can spend a lifetime learning to love and still never plumb her depths. You can spend years training yourself to scale the mountain of love and never reach the summit. You can work on love every hour of every day and still never reach the end. The love of God is infinite. It is boundless. It is eternal. It is steadfast, faithful, loyal, and true. I could preach every sermon from here to eternity about love and still not scratch the surface. That's how I feel every time I get to this part of the Gospels and read the words of Jesus in response to the question about the greatest commandment.

“‘Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.’ This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: ‘Love others as well as you love yourself.’ These two commands are pegs; everything in God’s Law and the Prophets hangs from them.” (Matthew 22:37-40 MSG)

These two commands are the pegs on which hang not only the Law and the Prophets but all of life itself. From the beginning, we were created in love to love. We were created to love God first. To walk with God in the Garden in the cool of the day. At the end when Jesus returns again, we will walk before the Lord once more. We will see Him face to face. We will dwell in the light of His presence. We will live in the midst of His glory. We will worship and adore Him continually. We were also created to love one another. It is not good for human beings to be alone. It's why loneliness creates an existential crisis. We were made for relationships. Made to relate to those around us. Made to relate to other human beings. We see this reflected in our biology. Male and female literally made to fit together. We see this reflected in our psychology as our emotions are specifically designed to help us engage with those around us. We see this reflected in our neurology as the brain literally fires up every time someone smiles at us or waves. God fearfully and wonderfully and specifically making us to live and move and have our being in love. Love is the foundation of all creation for God is love and He is the Creator. Love is what sustains all of life for God loves the world so much He will never let it go. Love is the antidote to our fear and anxiety because God's perfect love casts those things out. Love is the basis for our foundation for it is love that drove Jesus to lay His life down on the cross. Love is power for it is love that conquered the grave and raised Jesus from the dead. It's why Paul says to the Corinthians, “Love bears all things. Love believes all things. Love hopes all things. Love endures all things. Love never fails.”

How are you cultivating love in your life? Love for God? Love for those around you? Do you spend time with God each day, basking in His great love for you? Resting in His delight in you? Worshiping Him from a place of devotion and adoration? Do you worship God each week with God's people? Loving those around you even though they may be different? Loving those around you even though they may be at a different stage in the journey? Loving them even as you express your love to God through music and prayer and self-offering? How are you intentionally loving those around you? Your family? Your friends? Even those you are in conflict with right now or your enemies? Love is the answer, friends. It is always the answer because it is God's answer to the problem of human sin that corrupts everything in our world. Take courage today and press into love!

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 24-25, Mark 13, Luke 21:5-38

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 2, 2023
Be Prepared

Readings for today: Matthew 24-25, Mark 13, Luke 21:5-38 (audio reading)

Be prepared. It's the Boy Scout motto. As an Eagle Scout, it's a message that was drilled into me from a very young age. Be prepared when you go camping. Be prepared when you go hiking. Be prepared when you start a project. Be prepared for just about anything life will throw your way. I've taken that motto to heart. It's served me well over the years. Perhaps it's why I resonate so deeply with the passages we read for today. Jesus is essentially telling us to be prepared. Be prepared to suffer. Be prepared for the trials and tribulations to come. Be prepared for rejection. Be prepared for wars and violence and suffering and pain. Be prepared for natural disasters and disease. Be prepared for people to love injustice and ungodliness and unrighteousness. Be prepared for them to call good "evil" and evil "good." These are just the beginnings of the birth pangs of the new age.

In this confusing time, many will claim to speak for Jesus. They will claim to speak for God. They will push their own agendas. They will offer up their own ideas in place of God. They will promote selfishness and pride and narcissism. They will promote unrighteousness and lawlessness and unfettered freedom. They will sound so good that many will be led astray.

There will be abominations of desolation. Incredible acts of self-worship and idolatry that would make the ancient Canaanites blush. Worship will grow cold. Honoring God will become rare as people choose to do what feels good or what seems right in their own eyes. It will be like the days leading up to Noah. The days when the Judges reigned in Israel. Hatred. Rage. Violence. Injustice. All will become the norm as the world rebels against the authority of God.

Any of this sound familiar? Any of this feel familiar? What's a Christian to do in the midst of it all? Endure to the end. Persevere in their faith. Cling to Jesus. The world may hate us. The world may seek to destroy us. The world may persecute us. Throw us into prison. Torture us and even kill us. They may restrict our rights. They may label the preaching of the gospel "hate speech." They may make faithfulness to the law of God a hate crime. They may drag us into courts. They may put us on trial. They may do all they can to force us to abandon our faith. These things have certainly happened throughout history and are continuing to happen around the world today. And Jesus promises things will get so bad that if they weren't cut short – if God somehow delayed His return – no one would be saved.

Things will get so bad even nature itself will feel the effect. The sun will darken. The moon refuse to shine. It will seem like the stars have fallen out of the sky. And just when it seems like we cannot go on, Jesus will appear. He will come on the clouds with great glory and power! A trumpet will sound and the angels will gather His family from the four corners of the earth. We do not know exactly when this day will come but we know it draws ever closer. Seemingly with every single breaking news story! Climate change. Political corruption. Racism and hatred. Economic upheaval globally. Terrorism and warfare. The world seemingly stands on the brink.

So what's a Christian to do? Stay wise. Be prepared. Make sure we stay about the work God has assigned to us. Caring for the least among us. The hungry and thirsty. The naked and ashamed. The sick and imprisoned. As we care for them, we care for Jesus. Seek the lost. Fulfill the Great Commission. Take the gospel to every tribe, tongue, and nation in the world. This is the work the Master has assigned to us and when He comes again, may He find us faithful!

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 26:1-5, 14-35, Mark 14:1-2, 10-31, Luke 22:1-38, John 13

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 3, 2023
The Pain of Betrayal

Readings for today: Matthew 26:1-5, 14-35, Mark 14:1-2, 10-31, Luke 22:1-38, John 13

(audio reading)

Betrayal. None of us believe we are capable of it. All of us have probably experienced it on some level. It's one of the most painful things we can experience in this life. I think of the people I know who have experienced betrayal in their marriages when their spouse steps out on them. I think of the people I know who have had a business partner make deals behind their backs. I think of pastors I know who feel like their congregations turn on them or vice versa. I've seen it happen to close friends, associates, family members, you name it. It's brutal every time.

In our reading for today, Peter makes a bold claim. "Though the whole world walk away from you, I will never betray you, Jesus." Famous last words. I still remember standing in the courtyard of Caiaphas' house in Israel and thinking about Peter's words. Just a short walk away in the upper room, Peter seems so courageous and yet when confronted by a servant girl, he caves. Just a stone's throw where Peter makes his denial, Jesus will be confined to a basement storage room for the night before His crucifixion. It's amazing how close everything is over in the Holy Land. All of the events of the final few days of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection happen within a small geographic area. It really drives home the pain Jesus must have felt when he heard Peter betray him.

If you've been tracking with us this year as we've read through the Bible, you know "betrayal" is something God experiences over and over again. By committing Himself to His people, He exposes Himself willingly and freely to the pain of repeated betrayal. It's part of the cost God bears in order to remain faithful to His covenant. I can't imagine the pain God must have endured throughout the centuries. I certainly cannot imagine the pain God must have endured by being betrayed by His closest friends. At the same time, the story of the Bible is not about me identifying with God's pain as much as God identifying with my pain. He comes to us. He becomes one of us. He is with us. He never betrays us. Never forsakes us. Never abandons us. That's the great news of the gospel. God is faithful.

Readings for tomorrow: John 14-17

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 4, 2023
The Holy Spirit

Readings for today: John 14-17 (audio reading)

I love the Holy Spirit. He is the literal gift of God from God to anyone who places their faith in God. He proceeds from the Father and the Son. He comes to transplant our souls. Regenerate our hearts. Renew our minds. He is the Guide, Comforter, and Friend. He comes to make Christ known to us. He comes to remind us of all Christ taught and how Christ lived and most of all, to show us the meaning behind Christ's death and resurrection. He comes to give us peace. True shalom. He comes to make us whole and happy and fulfilled. He comes to expose the world's sin. He comes to teach the world righteousness. He comes to bring judgment on the evil one and all his works. He comes to make sense of why the world is the way it is and what God is doing about it. The Holy Spirit doesn't come to draw attention to Himself but to point beyond Himself to what God has done in Christ and what He will do in Christ to make all things new.

Sadly, the Holy Spirit is often misunderstood these days. Even by Christians. We perceive Him to be something like the "Force" from Star Wars or we think of Him like we think of ghosts and spirits. We talk about Him as if He is a power not a Person. We fail to recognize His Presence as the very Presence of God with us. We often overemphasize or underemphasize His gifts and we neglect His fruit. We do not seek to be filled with the Spirit. We do not know how to tune into the Spirit to hear what He is saying to us. We do not draw on the strength and wisdom of the Spirit to guide our everyday decisions in life. And the result of all this is a often a passionless, weak, impotent walk with Christ that doesn't live up to the Biblical hype.

So what can we do? We begin by seeking the Spirit. We seek the Spirit when we intentionally spend time in His presence. We learn to listen to the Spirit's voice by reading God's Word, meditating on it's meaning in silence and solitude, and waiting on Him to reveal His will to us. We learn to pay attention to the ways the Spirit speaks through Scripture to address our circumstances and we trust Him to lead us to godly decisions and godly actions. We learn to trust the Holy Spirit even when His will for us might run counter to what might normally do or naturally feel. We ask the Spirit to bear His fruit in our hearts and to give us His gifts so that we might serve. As practice these things, we learn to tune in more and more to the Spirit and become more attuned to His abiding Presence.

How are you being filled with the Spirit today? Where do you need the Spirit to move in your life today? Have you asked Him? Are you following Him? Are you seeking His guidance for your life?

Readings for tomorrow: None

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 6, 2023
Gethsemane

Readings for today: Matthew 26:36-75, Mark 14:32-72, Luke 22:39-71, John 18:1-27

(audio reading)

It's important not to rush through these readings. As familiar as these stories may be, it's important to read slowly. Savor each word. Let your heart connect to the deep emotions being expressed in the text. Jesus' grief and anxiety over what's to come. His heartfelt request to His Father to let the cup pass. His humble submission to the Father's will. The temptation He faces to call down legions of angels in His defense. His disappointment with His disciples. Jesus is experiencing the full range of human emotion as He approaches the final hours of His life here on earth.

I will say it helps having been there. I've walked in the Garden of Gethsemane. I've seen the olive trees whose lineage may trace back to the first century. I've walked the road up to Caiaphas' house where Jesus was taken after being arrested. I've stood in the courtyard where Peter denied Him. I've read Psalms of lament in the storage room where Jesus probably spent His final night. It's a powerful experience. All of the events of the final hours of Jesus happen within a very small geographic area. The close proximity of Gethsemane to Caiaphas' home to the Antonio Fortress to Golgotha and the empty tomb is striking. You can literally walk to all these places in the same day. You can touch the same stones. Breathe the same air. Taste the same dust.

Many theologians - myself among them - believe the agony Jesus began to feel in the Garden of Gethsemane was due to the withdrawal of the Holy Spirit. For the first time in His life, He was beginning to feel alone. The full weight of humanity's sin was now being placed upon His back. He would bear this final burden to the cross alone. Bereft of His Father's presence. Bereft of the Spirit's power. Jesus now walked this final leg of the journey in existential isolation and this caused Him unimaginable suffering that far outstripped any physical pain He would endure. It's impossible to get our minds around. It's a mystery beyond our understanding. Somehow the Trinity experiences a rupture without being ruptured. A separation without every separating. Isolation without ever losing communion. And all this takes place so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled and the Triune God's plan of salvation come to pass.

Jesus did all this for me. That's perhaps the biggest reason to slow down and let these words sink in. Jesus wept in the Garden over what it would cost Him to save me. Jesus prayed in the Garden for another way to save me. Jesus submitted in the Garden to unimaginable suffering so that He might save me. My sin created these conditions. My crimes against God deserved His full wrath and judgment. My rebellion is what Jesus came to put down. Not with violence but with love. Can I not pray with Him one hour? Can I not walk with Him without rushing through the reading? Can I not sit with Him and let the magnitude of what He's done sink in?

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 27:1-31, Mark 15:1-20, Luke 23:1-25, John 18:28-40, 19:1-16

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 7, 2023
Political Pressure

Readings for today: Matthew 27:1-31, Mark 15:1-20, Luke 23:1-25, John 18:28-40, 19:1-16
(audio reading)

Why did Jesus die? There are all kinds of answers. The most common answer is the theological one. Jesus died to take away the sins of the world. Jesus died in our place. Jesus died the death we deserved thus setting us free from the judgment of God. This is absolutely right and something every single Christian should affirm. However, it's only part of the picture.

To the Jewish authorities of His day, Jesus died because of blasphemy. He committed the most serious religious offense one could possibly commit by setting Himself up as the Son of God. He claimed to forgive sin in addition to healing disease, casting out demons, and even raising the dead. He taught as one who had divine authority not as the other teachers of the Law. He even claimed to be equal to God. All of these things, plus His growing popularity, made Him a dangerous threat to the religious groups who were vying for public approval so they had Him killed.

To the Roman authorities of His day, Jesus died because of political expediency. It was simply easier to put Him to death than have to deal with the civic unrest caused by His arrest and secret trial. Pilate could find no fault with Him. Nothing that would require the death penalty. He even tries to pardon Jesus several times or appease the crowd by having Him scourged or release Him according to ancient custom. None of it will do. The crowd smells blood. The religious leaders threaten to report Pilate to Caesar. Herod is no help. So Pilate tries to wash his hands of the whole thing and give the people what they want. He makes the decision to have Jesus crucified.

To the disciples, Jesus died tragically. They didn't know about the resurrection. They didn't realize this was all part of God's grand plan. All they knew was that their beloved rabbi was arrested at night, illegally tried and imprisoned, falsely accused, unjustly tortured and eventually executed. They were helpless to do anything about it. All they could do was stand by and watch as it all went down. Then they scattered in fear that the same thing might happen to them.

The death of Jesus is one of the clearest examples of how God uses everyday, ordinary means to accomplish His divine will. It was His will for Jesus to suffer and die on a cross. This was God's plan from eternity. It's foreshadowed in prophecy after prophecy from the Old Testament. There was nothing humanity could have done to delay or stop it from happening. At the same time, human beings made real choices along the way. We exercised our free will and God used the decisions we made to bring about His sovereign will. The Jewish leaders freely chose to accuse Jesus of blasphemy and bring political pressure to bear on Pilate. Pilate freely chose to cave to the pressure and condemn Jesus to death on a cross. The crowds freely chose to call for Jesus' crucifixion. None of them were forced to make those decisions. None of them realized the gravity of their decisions until after the fact.

At the end of the day, Jesus had to die because God decreed it. And God decreed it because God's great desire is to bring an end to the powers of sin and death. And God's decree was necessary because humanity sinned and fell short of the glory God intended. So we are the ones who are ultimately responsible. It was our sin that put Him on the cross. It was for our sake that He died.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 27:32-66, Mark 15:21-47, Luke 23:26-56, John 19:17-42, Psalm 22

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 8, 2023
Unimaginable Suffering

Readings for today: Matthew 27:32-66, Mark 15:21-47, Luke 23:26-56, John 19:17-42, Psalm 22
(audio reading)

There is nothing beautiful about the Cross. It stands unparalleled in human history as a horror. A terror. An act of unspeakable evil. The Cross is where we hung God. The Cross is where we murdered God. The Cross is where we executed God. Creation despising and rejecting her Creator. Humanity lynching her Savior. Sin having it's way. Satan rejoicing. His victory seemingly complete.

Jesus' suffering was unimaginable. After having been flogged and beaten. His flesh in tatters. His blood loss immense. Jesus is forced to shoulder a 300 lbs. Roman cross. (If He just carried the crossbeam - far more likely - it was still 100 lbs.) He carries it some two thousand feet up Golgotha where nails are driven into his hands and feet. They offer Him wine mixed with gall to numb the pain. He refuses. They strip Him naked so His humiliation and shame will be complete. Crowds gather to make a public spectacle of Him. Even the criminals being executed alongside Him take pleasure in His pain. Finally, He cries out, "My God, my God! Why have you forsaken Me?" Darkness falls. The ground shakes. The Temple curtain protecting the Holy of Holies is torn in two. Tombs are thrown open. The dead are raised. The natural order of things is thrown into chaos as the Author of Life dies.

Jesus didn't just suffer physically. It was existential. Ontological. Impacting his heart, mind, and soul as well. His cry of God-forsakenness reveals the depths of His pain. His body torn. His mind shattered. His heart utterly broken. His soul rent asunder. There is nothing that can compare to the agony He endured as He bore the sin of the world on His shoulders. He hung there alone. Forsaken by all who knew Him. All who loved Him. Even His Heavenly Father. Jesus hung between heaven and earth, making atonement for humanity in the ugliness of all her sin and satisfying the holy justice of God in all it's beautiful glory. A price had to be paid. God's righteous wrath had to be turned away. And Jesus - fully God and fully Man - was the only one who could do it.

What Jesus suffered on the Cross is a foretaste of hell. For those who wonder what hell is like, they need look no further than Jesus' crucifixion. It is truly terrifying. There is no escape. There is no hope. There is nothing redemptive or beautiful or pleasurable about it. It is awful. It is brutal. It is horrible. And it is just. It is what we deserve. Human beings are born sinners. Born rebellious. Born treasonous and seditious. Our hearts naturally oriented away from God. Our desires naturally opposed to God. Our loves naturally self-centered. There is nothing beautiful about sin. Nothing beautiful about evil. We are foolish to think otherwise.

God forbid we ever get comfortable with the Cross. God forbid we ever take for granted what Jesus had to endure. God forbid we despise His sacrifice on our behalf. Jesus suffered and died for my crimes. My wickedness. My sin. What He endured, I rightfully deserve. And it is good for my soul to sit and ponder the depth of my Savior's pain. It is good for my soul to sit and reflect on the unfathomable cost of my salvation. It is good for my soul to sit and contemplate how truly fierce and loyal and steadfast and unshakable is the love of God for me.

Readings for tomorrow: Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20-21

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 9, 2023
Resurrection

Readings for today: Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20-21 (audio reading)

Resurrection. It is the reason why I believe in Jesus Christ. It is what makes Him unique among the world's great religious leaders. All of the rest of them died. He remains alive. The empty tomb cannot be explained away. It cannot be dismissed. It cannot be ignored. I know many people who still want God to "prove" Himself. Prove He exists. Prove He is who He says He is. My answer to them is what more can you want? He literally came to earth, died on a cross, and rose again from the grave. What other proof do you need? What other evidence could God possibly present to convince you? He rose bodily from the grave, showing us the wounds in His hands, His feet, and His sides. Again, what more do you want?

The resurrection of Jesus Christ stands as the seminal event in human history. It demands attention. It requires reflection. One simply cannot pretend it didn't happen. If Jesus was raised from the dead then we have to take Him seriously. We have to consider every word that He said. We have to grapple with the truth He proclaimed about a Kingdom not of this world ruled by a God who loves the world despite it's sin and who promises to come again to judge in righteousness. We have to wrestle with what He has to say about the human condition. The sinful state of our hearts and our desperate need for forgiveness and grace. We have to listen to Him when He tells us how to repent of our stubborn, prideful, selfish ways. The resurrection validates everything about Jesus. His life. His teaching. His miracles. His suffering. His death. It is God's stamp of approval on the unique identity Jesus claimed for Himself as the Son of God.

Because Jesus rose from the dead, everything He says about the world is true. Everything He says about humanity is true. Everything He says about heaven and hell is true. Everything He says about life and death is true. Everything He says about good and evil is true. Everything He says about me is true. I am loved and I am broken. I am accepted and I am convicted. I am a saint and I am a sinner. I am justified and I am being sanctified. God embraces me as I am but doesn't leave me there. He has set me free from the power of sin and death and He is still setting me free each and every day. This is what it means to believe in and to follow the Risen Christ.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 1-4, Psalm 110

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 10, 2023

Power

Readings for today: Acts 1-4, Psalm 110 (audio reading)

The promise of the Holy Spirit is the promise of power. Divine, supernatural power filling us so that we might be Jesus' witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. It's a good thing Jesus gives us His power because we couldn't accomplish His mission without it. The stakes are too high. The challenges too great. The obstacles too daunting. The trials too hard. The suffering too painful. Whether you're walking across the street to share Christ with a neighbor or you are at work sharing Christ with a co-worker or you're headed across the world to share Christ with someone who's never had access to the gospel before, it requires power to accomplish. God's power not our own.

Every Christian I've talked to over the years wants this power. They want to experience the miraculous power of God in their life. They want to see the miraculous power of God on display. They want to feel the miraculous power of God within them. But for so many Christians, God's power remains an abstract concept. An elusive idea. Something they acknowledge as possible but don't expect to actually ever experience. Why is that? What is it that holds us back? What is it that keeps us from living and walking in God's power as His followers? Simply put, we aren't serious enough about God's mission. God grants us His power not to use for ourselves. Not to use to enrich our own lives. Not to make us healthy and wealthy and wise. This is where the prosperity preachers have it all wrong. God's power is not given to us so that we can spend it on ourselves. No, God gives us His power so that we might be His witnesses to a dead and dying world. He gives us His power so that we might serve His Kingdom purposes. He gives us His power so that we might spread the good news of the gospel.

Being a witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth requires risk. It requires us to take steps of faith. It requires us to sacrifice. When we do these things for the sake of God's mission in the world, we see miraculous things take place. Hell is emptied and heaven is filled as people come to saving faith. The blind see. The deaf hear. The lame walk. The diseased are cured. The demon-possessed are set free. The dead are raised. I've seen all these things and more in my travels around the world as Christians put themselves at great risk in order to proclaim the gospel and plant churches where the name of Jesus has never been spoken or even heard. I've also seen some of these same things in my own home town as believers that I know and love take risks to share their faith, stand for the gospel, proclaim truth, and sacrifice in incredible ways to reach the lost and least resourced.

If you want God's power in your life, there is only one way to get it. Get on mission for Jesus! Join Jesus on His mission to reach the lost and serve the least resourced. Intentionally go to places and meet people who need Jesus desperately. Take risks. Prayerfully sacrifice. Find ways to serve. Step out in faith. God will meet you there in a powerful way and you will experience Him in ways you never thought possible.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 5-8

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 11, 2023
Power on Display

Readings for today: Acts 5-8 (audio reading)

Today's devotional is a follow up to yesterday. Again, if you want to experience God's divine power, you must engage in God's mission to reach the world with the gospel. That's what we see on display in the Book of Acts. It's also what we see taking place around the world today. According to scholars like Philip Jenkins, there is a revival taking place all over the globe. Africa will have over 1 billion Christians by 2050. Latin America over 650 million. Asia over 600 million. Yes, the growth of Christianity in North America will continue to slow to a crawl and will face steep decline in Europe. As the faces of Christianity change, so will the shape of Christianity. No longer will the theological tone be set by the Reformation of the 16th century in Western Europe but by the Reformation taking place in Ethiopia, Uganda, China, Nigeria, Brazil and Mexico. This new movement is decidedly Pentecostal. It is boldly Charismatic. The preaching of the gospel in these countries is often accompanied by signs and wonders and miracles. God's power on display in and through His witnesses.

In our readings for today, we see signs and wonders all over the place. From the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira for lying to the Holy Spirit to the healings and casting out of demons by the Apostles at Solomon's Portico. Stephen, a man full of wisdom and the Holy Spirit, performs great wonders and signs as he preaches the gospel. And Philip seems to drive out demons left and right. How awesome must it have been to be part of this movement in its earliest days? To see the miracles taking place? To watch as scores of people get saved on a daily basis? Worship services filled with new believers? Homes filled to overflowing with spiritual seekers? Everyone of one heart and one mind even in the face of persecution?

Why doesn't this happen in America? Why doesn't this happen in our local communities? What are we missing? What we are missing is a desperation for God. A hunger and thirst for His righteousness. An overwhelming longing for His Kingdom. Affluence is a spiritual killer. It makes us soft and complacent. It tempts us into depending on our own power rather than God's power. We start to believe we have enough so we don't need God. We have doctors and nurses and medication and treatment so we don't need miraculous healing. We have psychologists and psychiatrists and an abundance of counselors to help us deal with our demons. (I am purposefully being a bit facetious here to make a point. Please don't take these words to mean I don't have the deepest appreciation for those who work in the medical field or am being dismissive of the complexities of mental illness.) We have plenty of food and clean water to drink. Warm homes to sleep in and closets full of clothes. We receive great education at the finest of schools. Our economy is the strongest in the world so everyone can have a job. What do we need God for? This is why Jesus Himself says it is harder for a rich person to get into heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Basically it is impossible because we become so attached to the things of this world. Our primary concern becomes safety and comfort rather than the proclamation of the gospel. Our primary goal becomes taking care of ourselves or those we love first rather than seeking to save the lost. We start walking by sight rather than by faith so is it really any wonder then that we don't see the signs and wonders and miracles of God?

Thankfully what is impossible for us is more than possible for God! And His great desire is for us to experience all the spiritual blessings He has stored up in heaven for His people. (Eph. 1:3) So the image I want to leave you with is Jesus standing out on the lake, having walked on water. You and I are sitting comfortably in our yachts and Jesus is beckoning to us. Calling us out. Calling us out of our comfort zones. Calling us out of our safe spaces. Calling us to leave behind our wealth and possessions. To

come out of the gilded cages we find ourselves trapped in and go to him. Actually walk on water ourselves as we fix our eyes on Him. This is not an easy journey. Almost as soon as we leave the safety of our boats, we start to feel the waves rocking and rolling beneath us. We see the wind kick up and the clouds move in. The temptation is to run back to safety. Run back to what we know. Run back to what is comfortable and normal for us. But Jesus is insistent. He is relentless. His voice booms out over the waters. His voice rises above the storm. “Come to me!” He says. Let go of all you have. Unclench those fists. Relinquish your need for control. Come out to where I am and you will see My signs. My wonders. My miracles. For I am Faithful. I am True. I will not let you sink beneath the waves.

Readings for tomorrow: None

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 13, 2023
Radical Transformation

Readings for today: Acts 9-11 (audio reading)

It's hard to get our minds around the transformation of Saul. One day, he is literally the fiercest enemy of the church and the next, he is her fiercest defender. One day, he is dragging Christians out of their homes, throwing them in prison, and calling for their execution and the next, he himself is risking it all to proclaim the gospel. One day, he is the hunter and the next, he is the hunted. Nothing short of an encounter with the Risen Christ could effect such a change and that, of course, is exactly what happened.

If you're looking for a modern day example, you might check out the story of Mosab Hassan Yousef. Mosab is the oldest son of one of the founders of Hamas. He was groomed from a very young age to take over the terrorist organization. His father, Sheikh Hassan Yousef, lives in the West Bank where he has coordinated the activities of Hamas for decades. He has been arrested several times for inciting terrorism, most recently in the wake of the attacks on October 7th. Mosab rejected his father's legacy of terror in favor of the way of Jesus. He even worked with Mossad from 1997-2007 to prevent terror attacks from happening in Israel. He has a powerful testimony and believes it is only by "loving our enemies" that peace can come to the Middle East.

Only Jesus Christ can make this kind of radical transformation possible. He alone can change the human heart. He alone can give us a new spirit. He alone can lead us to repentance which is a 180 degree turn in life. Most of us will probably never engage in the terror campaigns Saul conducted when he was a Pharisee. We will never join any kind of terror organization like Mosab. However, we are all born into sin and enslaved by it's power. Only the Risen Christ can set us free. Only the Risen Christ can open our blind eyes to see Him for who He truly is. Only the Risen Christ can raise us to new life.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 12-14

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 14, 2023

Missions

Readings for today: Acts 12-14 (audio reading)

It is amazing to read about Paul's first missionary journey. Coming on the heels of persecution in Jerusalem which cost James his life and put Peter in prison, the church in Antioch responds to the call of the Spirit to send out missionaries to proclaim the good news of the gospel. Barnabus and Paul are chosen after a lengthy time of prayer and fasting and worship. They travel from Antioch to Cyprus to Perga which is a gateway city to the region of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). From there, they hit the cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe. All told, they travel around 1500 miles in about two years before returning to report the great news that many Gentiles are turning to faith in Jesus Christ!

Three things to note that will become paradigmatic for future missionary endeavors, including in our own day and age. First, the bold proclamation of the gospel. Paul was utterly convinced God had raised Jesus from the dead and that this was the fulfillment of all the promises given to Israel. Many have argued that Paul's conversion represented a radical break with his prior Pharisaism. On the contrary! Paul himself argues that the resurrection of Jesus is the fulfillment of all he believed. "And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus..." (Acts 13:32-33) Everything changed for Paul that day he met the Risen Christ outside of Damascus. He was confronted with the truth that everything he believed about Israel had now come true in Jesus Christ. Yahweh had indeed raised His Son from the dead in vindication of everything Jesus had taught. Far from being an enemy of the Jewish faith, Jesus was the fulfillment! And Paul's zealous passion for the faith of his fathers now would make him the greatest evangelist the world has ever known.

Second, the proclamation of the gospel was confirmed by signs and wonders. Wherever Barnabus and Paul went, the sick were healed. Demons were cast out. People were set free from oppression. Paul shows no fear in confronting powerful witch-doctors like Bar-Jesus. He calls down God's judgment on the man and strikes him blind. This was not an act of self-promotion. In fact, when the people of Lystra attempt to worship Paul and Barnabus because of the miracle they performed in making a lame man walk, they tore their garments. They refused to let it happen. They assured the people they were not gods but simply ordinary men serving the One True God, the maker of heaven and earth. No, the point of all the miracles and signs and wonders was to bring people to saving faith. To confirm the truth of the gospel they preached.

Finally, persecution. No matter where Paul and Barnabus went, they faced opposition. From the pagans in power like Bar-Jesus to the Jews who refused to receive their message. They were beaten. They were stoned. They were attacked and left for dead. The Word of God is a double-edged sword and it stirred the hearts of those who listened. Some received the good news with glad hearts and came to faith. Others perceived it as a threat and lashed out. There is no such thing as being neutral when it comes to Jesus!

Friends, this same dynamic is being played out the world over even today. My friends in Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda, and Djibouti all share similar testimonies. They boldly proclaim the gospel in villages, towns, and cities where it has never been heard. Their preaching is often accompanied by many signs and wonders and miracles. The sick are healed. The demon-oppressed set free. The dead are raised to new life. But these men and women face extreme persecution as well. Beaten. Stabbed.

Shot. Imprisoned. Left for dead. Their families are attacked. Their livelihoods threatened. Some of them even lose their lives for the sake of the Kingdom. And yet, the “the Word of God continues to increase and multiply!” (Acts 12:24)

God is not done! Despite what you may or may not hear, He is still very much on the move! He will not rest or relent until the whole world hears the good news of the gospel! This is His will! This is His plan! And to this great end, He calls His church! This is the reason we exist! Not for ourselves but for the sake of the world! May we understand and embrace our calling to be missionaries in our communities and to the very ends of the earth!

Readings for tomorrow: James 1-5

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 15, 2023
A Life of Wisdom

Readings for today: James 1-5 (audio reading)

It's been observed by many in our world today that we are inundated with knowledge. We have more information at our fingertips than ever before. There is more news in one edition of the New York Times than a person might have learned over a lifetime a hundred years ago. The news cycle is 24/7. The alerts to our phones come day and night. Twitter and other social media feeds keep us up to date on the latest stories. And yet, we seem more foolish than ever. We seem more ideologically driven than ever. We seem more partisan than ever. More outraged. More angry. More hateful. More knowledge obviously isn't the answer.

What we need is wisdom. Wisdom helps us understand what to do with all the knowledge we have gained. It guides us as we seek to apply that knowledge to life's challenges. It keeps us honest, forcing us to grapple with our blind spots and weaknesses. It prevents us from becoming puffed up with pride and arrogantly assuming we have all the answers. Wisdom is the key to living well in this world. Living for God in this world. And thankfully, the Book of James teaches us all we need to know about how to gain wisdom. Listen to his words again...

“Do you want to be counted wise, to build a reputation for wisdom? Here's what you do: Live well, live wisely, live humbly. It's the way you live, not the way you talk, that counts. Mean-spirited ambition isn't wisdom. Boasting that you are wise isn't wisdom. Twisting the truth to make yourselves sound wise isn't wisdom. It's the furthest thing from wisdom—it's animal cunning, devilish plotting. Whenever you're trying to look better than others or get the better of others, things fall apart and everyone ends up at the others' throats. Real wisdom, God's wisdom, begins with a holy life and is characterized by getting along with others. It is gentle and reasonable, overflowing with mercy and blessings, not hot one day and cold the next, not two-faced. You can develop a healthy, robust community that lives right with God and enjoy its results only if you do the hard work of getting along with each other, treating each other with dignity and honor.” (James 3:13-18 MSG)

Real wisdom begins with a holy life. A life humbly submitted to God. A life lived in obedience to Him. A life characterized by love and grace and mercy and peace. It is a life marked by gentleness and dignity and respect and honor. It is a life that is focused on the good of others rather than the good of oneself. This is how God defines wisdom and this is how God also models wisdom Himself. Does He not offer us love and grace and mercy and peace? Does He not treat us with gentleness and dignity and respect and honor? Is He not focused on our good rather than His own? He is all these things and more which is what makes Him the “only wise God” as the great hymn once put it. And those who seek wisdom in this world will only find it as they seek to follow Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Galatians 1-3

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 16, 2023
Christ Alone

Readings for today: Galatians 1-3 (audio reading)

It is so easy to turn to another gospel. This isn't just a Galatian problem. It happens every time we condition our fellowship with one another based on something other than Christ. Over the years, I've had Christians share all kinds of reasons with me why they can't worship alongside their brothers and sisters. For some, the reasons may be denominational. I'm Baptist or Presbyterian or Roman Catholic or Greek Orthodox or independent. For others, the reasons may be theological. I'm Reformed or Armenian or Roman Catholic or Orthodox. For some, the reasons may be ethnic or cultural or economic or political. For others, the reasons may be relational. They hurt me, disappointed me, or let me down in some way. Finally, there are the personal preferences that keep us apart. I don't like the music or the preacher or the style of worship. Whatever the reason, any time we allow a human reason to get in the way of our ability to gather in worship with other brothers and sisters in Christ, we are in danger of chasing a different gospel.

The Apostle Paul makes it clear that the church is built on one foundation and that is Jesus Christ. Listen to how he describes in Galatians 2:19-21, "What actually took place is this: I tried keeping rules and working my head off to please God, and it didn't work. So I quit being a "law man" so that I could be God's man. Christ's life showed me how, and enabled me to do it. I identified myself completely with him. Indeed, I have been crucified with Christ. My ego is no longer central. It is no longer important that I appear righteous before you or have your good opinion, and I am no longer driven to impress God. Christ lives in me. The life you see me living is not "mine," but it is lived by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I am not going to go back on that. Is it not clear to you that to go back to that old rule-keeping, peer-pleasing religion would be an abandonment of everything personal and free in my relationship with God? I refuse to do that, to repudiate God's grace. If a living relationship with God could come by rule-keeping, then Christ died unnecessarily." Can you imagine what would happen if the church took Paul's words here literally? Can you imagine a church where the human ego was not just set aside but actually crucified? Where personal preference was no longer central? Where pride and privilege and prejudice were no longer allowed to hold any influence? Where the only thing that mattered was Christ making Himself known in and through me?

The reality is the church should seek to become a fellowship only Jesus is strong enough to hold together. The church should seek to become a fellowship where radical grace and unqualified forgiveness and unconditional love is not just aspired to or talked about but actually practiced. The church should seek to become a fellowship where homogeneity and unanimity are rejected in favor of the beautiful diversity God ordains for her in Revelation 7:9 where every tribe, tongue, and language gathers before the throne. This is God's dream for His church and it's why the gates of hell cannot stand against her. She is built on the one, true confession which is Christ alone.

Readings for tomorrow: Galatians 4-6

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 17, 2023
Never Going Back...

Readings for today: Galatians 4-6 (audio reading)

Several years ago, I remember talking to a friend of mine who had recently gotten out of prison after serving several decades for a violent crime. He had done his time. He had paid his debt to society. He had done his best to make amends and ask forgiveness of the victim and their family. And although he knew he would never get those years back, he also knew he had many years ahead where he could make an impact for God's Kingdom. However, it soon became apparent to him that life on the outside would not be easy. There were very few jobs to be had for ex-cons. There were very few resources available to him in his community. He didn't have much family support and the temptation to recidivate was very real. After all, the prison life was something he understood. In fact, he had spent his entire adult life up to this point behind bars. The routine felt comfortable. He ate three meals a day. He had a comfortable bed to sleep in. He had a job to go to each day. Yes, it was a pain to be told what to do and when to do it. Yes, it was dehumanizing to be counted five or six times a day or to have your cell searched without warning. Yes, he wasn't treated well by the guards and he always had to be careful around the other inmates. But it was a world he had navigated well and even thrived in. He had gotten his bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees behind bars. He had become the inmate chaplain. He preached weekly and led Bible studies. He had earned respect. All of that was gone now that he was on the outside.

In our discussion, we talked at length about this passage from Galatians. We talked at length about the difference between a "free" mentality and a "slave" mentality. We talked at length about how comfortable we can become in the prison house of sin, enslaved to the great enemy of our souls. In fact, we can become so comfortable that even after Christ has set us free, we often find ourselves tempted to recidivate to our old ways. It's what we know. It's what's familiar. It's a world we often navigate well to a certain extent. We may even gain a certain level of respect for ourselves or others based on our success. But all that becomes meaningless once Christ has come into our lives and set us free. He reorders our desires. He reorients our values. He calls us to lay down our lives in order to gain them. He calls us to be last so that we may be first. He calls us to humbly serve and love others, even our enemies. This is what freedom looks like in God's Kingdom.

My friend made me a promise when we talked that day. He said, "Doug, I promise you I'm never going back." I'm never going back to prison. Never going back to that lifestyle. Never going back behind bars where every action I take and every decision I make has to be approved by some human authority. I told him how proud I was of him and how I would stand by his side to help him along the way so he would never be alone. And I asked him to do the same for me. The reality is I don't want to go back either. I don't want to go back to the prison of the life I led before Christ. I don't want to go back to a lifestyle of sin. I don't want to return to a life of slavery where every action I take and every decision I make is beholden to an enemy who seeks to steal, kill, and destroy all God has done in my life to set me free. It is for freedom that Christ has set me free and I refuse to submit again to a yoke of slavery.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 15-16

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 18, 2023
Essentials

Readings for today: Acts 15-16 (audio reading)

It's so easy for human beings to divide. We've been doing it for centuries. We divide over language, culture, ethnicity, and tribal affiliation. We divide over land, money, wealth, and power. We divide over politics, social action, and religious faith. We divide over disappointments, hurts, and fears. Christians are no different. Despite the fact that we are bound by a spiritual bond in Jesus Christ that is thicker than blood or water, we cannot seem to help ourselves. We are vulnerable to the same pressures that divide every other group of human beings.

The early church had to fight to stay together. Despite the cultural forces arrayed against them and the persecution they suffered at the hands of their enemies, they still found the time and energy to fight amongst themselves. Circumcision was the pressing issue of the day. The cultural practice had set apart the Jewish people since the beginning. All the way back to Abraham. It was essential to their identity as God's covenant people. But now Gentiles are coming to faith in droves. Their numbers are threatening to overwhelm the early church. The Jewish Christians are rapidly becoming a minority and probably feeling under threat. Like all these new people had stolen "their" church. So a group of them band together and begin teaching the new Gentile Christians that faith in Jesus Christ was not enough. Baptism was not enough. They needed to be circumcised in addition to these things if they truly believed and wanted to belong. This created all kinds of controversy. Paul and Barnabas go nuts. The early church is wracked by conflict and so they call a meeting of all the leaders in Jerusalem. The case is presented. They seek the mind of Christ together. The Holy Spirit makes His will known. And the mark of circumcision is rejected as a requirement.

This won't be the end of the story, of course. Human beings are notoriously rebellious and many of those early Jewish Christians will continue to cause Paul headaches as he plants his churches around the Roman world. So will the Gentile Christians, by the way! It's just so easy for any of us to fall prey to focusing on the non-essentials rather than the essentials of our faith. It's so easy for us to focus on what separates us rather than what holds us together. It's so easy to focus on our differences rather than our shared convictions which is why there are so many different denominations and churches in the world today. Boil the Christian faith down to it's essentials and what do you have? Romans 10:9, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

Readings for tomorrow: None

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 20, 2023

Conflict

Readings for today: Acts 17:1-18:18 (audio reading)

Jesus was clear that His followers would face trials and tribulation. We will face hostility and conflict and persecution. People will attack us for our beliefs and they will consider our way of life a threat. They will not understand why we live the way we do and even try to have us thrown in prison for our faith. We've seen this happen throughout history and even in many places around the world today. Following Jesus is not for the faint of heart. It will place you in conflict with the principalities and powers of this present age. It will not win you friends or make you much of an influencer. If it does, you're probably doing it wrong. The way of Jesus remains a "stumbling block" to the religious and "foolishness" to the irreligious so you will take heat from both sides. This is why so many struggle remain faithful over the long haul. Frankly, it's why so many of my pastoral colleagues are burning out, washing out, or opting out of full-time ministry. They get tired of taking the shots. They get tired of having of waking up to yet another fight. They get tired of being beaten down and targeted for their faith.

There is a growing hostility in our nation today towards followers of Jesus. Our beliefs and our ethics pose a threat to the emerging moral order. Our views on gender and sexual ethics, in particular, have not just come under fire, they are considered abusive and dangerous. Our beliefs about God and His final judgment on sin and death and evil are considered laughable, intolerant, and unacceptable. Our commitment to Jesus as "the way, the truth, and the life" is considered exclusive, biased, and narrow-minded. It's becoming increasingly clear that anyone who holds such views will be denied positions in government or business or the classroom. Anyone who proclaims such views will be sanctioned or canceled in the public sphere. They will be labeled a hate-monger, immoral, and a bigot. So what's a Christian to do?

We follow the example of Paul. Everywhere Paul went, he faced hostility. He dealt with conflict. He was shouted down. He was disrespected. He was chased by lynch mobs and dragged before the courts. He was attacked and ridiculed for what he preached and still he persevered. He endured. He refused to repay evil with evil. He resisted the temptation to use human means to achieve divine ends. He turned the other cheek. He stood his ground without lashing out. He kept on preaching even in the midst of all his pain and suffering. He trusted God with the results. We would do well to learn from him.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Thessalonians 1-5

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 21, 2023

Empathy

Readings for today: 1 Thessalonians 1-5 (audio reading)

As crazy as it sounds, I recently ran across a corner of Christian social media critiquing “empathy.” It seems there are a certain segment of pastors who are very concerned that Christians might show too much empathy for those who are struggling or lost or poor or marginalized in some way. I have to say going to down that rabbit hole was one of the most discouraging things I have done in a long time. It was brutal to see such a lack of love and caring from Christians who have been called to imitate Christ in how they lead and serve. Such a difference in tone from what we read in 1 Thessalonians today!

I love what Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 2:8, “We loved you dearly. Not content to just pass on the Message, we wanted to give you our hearts. And we did.” This is the very definition of empathy. Empathy has to do with feeling the feelings of others. It literally means entering their hearts and experiencing what they experience. It’s why we talk about “grieving with those who grieve” and “weeping with those who weep.” When we sit in the dust and ashes of a person’s life with them, we are expressing not just sympathy and compassion but something even deeper and more profound. Empathy levels the ground. It puts us all in the same boat together as we experience the challenges of navigating this life. Again, Paul puts it well, “Even though we had some standing as Christ’s apostles, we never threw our weight around or tried to come across as important, with you or anyone else. We weren’t standoffish with you. We took you just as you were. We were never patronizing, never condescending, but we cared for you the way a mother cares for her children.” (1 Thessalonians 2:6-7 MSG)

As I watched the videos and listened to the podcasts and read the articles/blogs written by the anti-empathy crowd, I found myself wishing I could sit down and read through 1 Thessalonians with them. I would want to listen to how they process not just “what” Paul shares in this letter but “how” he shares it. As far as I can tell, these pastors are responding out of fear. They fear the compromises that often come when one courageously enters into another person’s heart or condition or experience. It’s tempting to soften our own convictions in order to come alongside someone who is hurting or broken or feeling all alone. I get it. I really do. And yet, the Apostle Paul makes it clear from his own life that it’s possible to maintain one’s deep convictions while showing empathy to those who are struggling. I know my life has been immeasurably enriched by the time I’ve spent with the global poor, the socially/politically oppressed, the struggling and hurting, and other marginalized groups. I’ve learned so much about God and His heart that I otherwise would have been blind to had I not engaged in empathetic listening and learning with these brothers and sisters.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Thessalonians 1-3

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 22, 2023
Persecution

Readings for today: 2 Thessalonians 1-3 (audio reading)

Amidst a rising tide of persecution and affliction, the faith of the Thessalonian Christians was rising. Their love for each other was growing. These are not surprising developments for anyone familiar with church history. In the face of hostility, the church seems to flourish. In the face of threat or danger or torture or even death itself, the church only grows more bold. Consider the witness of the underground church in Iran today which may be the fastest growing church in the world. Consider the witness of the underground church in China which may be the largest “Christian” nation in the world. Consider the revival taking place in the Horn of Africa among the Muslims who live there as church planters risk their lives to preach the gospel to them. It’s simply amazing.

This is why the Apostle Paul boasts about the Thessalonian church wherever he goes on his missionary journeys. He wants the churches he plants to follow their example. He wants them to be encouraged in the face of opposition. He wants them to show the same steadfastness and faith that their brothers and sisters have shown amidst all the persecutions and afflictions they were enduring. It’s the same in our world today. It’s why I love coming home to share about what I have seen over in Africa. Recently, I even had an elder in our church tell me, “I wish we could bottle up a little bit of the Holy Spirit energy you bring back with you to give to everyone here.” He’s not wrong. That’s my desire as well.

Now let me be clear. There was nothing superhuman about the Thessalonian Christians. There is nothing superhuman about the Iranian or Chinese or African Christians in our world today. The power to endure hostility and affliction and persecution does not come from us. It comes from God and it is His call to every single Christian. Friends, we simply do not have the power to live the Christian life on our own. We do not have the will or the discipline to make it happen. Left to our own devices, we will struggle. Left to our own resources, we will fall. Trusting in our own strength, we will fail. Living the Christian life is not a matter of learning some new techniques. It’s not a matter of turning over a new leaf. It is about transformation. Total-life transformation from the inside out and it is the work of God.

Jump down to verses 11-12 of the first chapter. Here Paul prays for three things for his Thessalonian friends. All of them come from God. Not a single one is rooted in the human heart. He prays God will make them worthy of His calling. Essentially, he is praying for God’s Spirit to so root and ground them in the righteousness of Christ that every facet of their lives - home, community, work, school, etc. - would reflect His glory. He prays their lives might become a living reflection of the reality God has already brought about through their salvation in Jesus Christ. In Christ we are the very righteousness of God. Those called by Christ are constantly being formed and re-formed into His image, thereby being made worthy of the initial call God placed on their lives when He first saved them.

The second thing Paul prays for is for God to fulfill their every resolve for good. Each and every day, we are faced with a fundamental choice. Will I live for God or will I live for me? Will I live selflessly or selfishly? Will I seek to honor God or will I gratify the desires of the sinful nature? This fundamental choice works itself out in lots of different situations in every facet of our lives. It pops up in every conversation. Every task assigned to us. Every chore we perform. Every interaction we have with another divine image-bearer who crosses our path. However it manifests itself, the fundamental choice is always the same. Will we do good or evil? And because we are predisposed through our sinful nature to do evil, we need God’s help to do good.

The final thing Paul prays for is the power to perform every work of faith. Once God has called us and set us apart for Himself. And once He has reoriented our desires away from evil and towards the good. The final piece we need is the power to actually perform the action. We need the power to actually take the next step. To confirm our calling by acting on our resolve to walk by faith and not by sight. Only by tapping the limitless power of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit will we ever find the strength to live for Christ. And this is why we must spend so much time with Him. Learning to hear His voice. Seek His wisdom. Surrender to His strength. This is why prayer and meditation on Scripture is absolutely vital to the Christian life. It's why weekly worship with a local body of believers is essential for every single Christian. It is through these ordinary "means of grace" that God makes us worthy of His calling. Fulfills our every resolve for good. And gives us the strength to perform every work of faith.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 18:19-19:41

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 23, 2023

Spirit-Filled

Readings for today: Acts 18:19-19:41 (audio reading)

The Christian life is a Spirit-filled life. There simply is no other way to live it. It is not just a system of ethics. It is not just another human philosophy. It is not just a man-made religion with all sorts of rules and regulations on how to get to heaven after you die. It is a life animated and empowered by the very Spirit of the Living God. It is a life full of miracles and signs and wonders. It is a life blessed by the Creator and Sustainer and Redeemer of the universe. It is a life that looks like the one Jesus led.

In our reading from the Book of Acts today, we run across a curious story. A gifted Christian preacher named Apollos was proving to be very effective in sharing the good news of the gospel but his message was incomplete. He taught the way of Jesus “up to a point but only went as far as the baptism of John.” (Acts 18:25 MSG) What does that mean? Paul explains it in the very next chapter. John preached a baptism of repentance, of radical life-change, in order to prepare the way of the Lord. John was the last Old Testament prophet sent by God to prepare people for the coming of the Messiah. He was Elijah reborn as it were and God used him powerfully to prepare the soil for the message of the Kingdom of God. John’s message served a particular purpose for a particular season but that season ended with the coming of Jesus. Jesus was the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. John himself said he was unworthy to untie his sandals and by clinging to and teaching John’s message, Apollos was actually leading potential believers astray.

Thankfully, Apollos was humble and teachable and submitted to the leadership of Priscilla and Aquila. It made his preaching even more powerful because now he was armed with the message of grace. Grace, friends, is the key difference between John’s baptism and Jesus’ baptism. John’s baptism is a baptism of repentance. It is a baptism based on our desires and our thoughts and our actions. Jesus’ baptism, on the other hand, is much greater and much more profound. It is a baptism based on grace. God’s unmerited favor towards those He loves. God’s unconditional pardon and forgiveness of our sins. God giving us the free gift of righteousness in Jesus Christ. God transforming us from the inside out through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. This is what those “almost believers” who were responding to the preaching of Apollos had missed and it is what the Apostle Paul corrects when he arrives in Ephesus.

I meet so many believers today who align more with John’s baptism than the baptism of Jesus. They rely more on their own works rather than on grace as they seek to win God’s favor. They come to the end of their lives and they trust they’ve “done enough” or been “good enough” for God. These are all signs we are still struggling to believe rightly about the Christian faith and we still need the Priscillas and Aquilas of the world to teach us the true way of Jesus. The way of grace.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Corinthians 1-4

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 24, 2023
The Commandment We Can't Seem to Keep

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 1-4 (audio reading)

Unity. The Bible makes it clear that God's people are to be one even as He is one. We are to experience unity in community even as He experiences unity in community - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are called to ground our identity in Christ crucified. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else. In Psalm 133, God declares it to be good when brothers and sisters dwell together in unity. In fact, He even says He commands His blessing upon the unity of His people. In John 17, Jesus prays for our unity. He asks the Father to send the Spirit to make us one with each other even as we are one with Him. And here in 1 Corinthians, Paul challenges the early church to overcome their divisions and lean into their unity in Christ together.

What is it about us human beings that makes us so prone to division and why is it that Christians often seem to lead the way? There are over 26,000 different denominations in the Western Church and we seem to have exported division to the Global South. We go our separate ways so easily. Some divide over the fine points of theology. Some divide over church government and organization. Some divide over church hurt and disappointment. Some divide over ethnicity or culture. Some divide because relationships with other believers have gone south. Some divide simply because they like the newest preacher and/or newest church in town. I am absolutely convinced it breaks the heart of God and brings down His judgment because division, simply put, is sin.

Paul is direct with his Corinthian brothers and sisters. They have fallen prey to the temptation to divide over personality. Some claim to follow Apollos. Some claim to follow Peter. Some claim to follow Paul. And the super-spiritual claim to follow the Messiah but clearly at the expense of the other groups! This kind of behavior cannot be tolerated! Not in the family of God! Paul makes it clear towards the end of chapter one that the root of division is pride. Listen to how he describes it and think about your own experience with the church, "Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of "the brightest and the best" among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these "nobodies" to expose the hollow pretensions of the "somebodies"? That makes it quite clear that none of you can get by with blowing your own horn before God. Everything that we have—right thinking and right living, a clean slate and a fresh start—comes from God by way of Jesus Christ. That's why we have the saying, "If you're going to blow a horn, blow a trumpet for God." (1 Corinthians 1:26-31 MSG) God clearly had done a mighty work in saving them from the powers of hell and death and the devil but still it was not enough. The Corinthians were engaged in the age-old sin of self-promotion. They were fighting over status and power and influence and control. And the result was devastating to their witness in the larger community.

Sadly, not much has changed in two thousand years. Christians are still fighting the same battles. Still engaged in the age-old sin of self-promotion only now this particular sin has been super-charged by social media. We are still engaged in fights over status, power, wealth, influence, and control. We continue to leave churches over the smallest of slights rather than forgive. We constantly major in the minors and make non-essentials of theology essential. Meanwhile, the Great Commission continues to go largely unfulfilled. The Great Commandment to love God and love each other seems largely forgotten. And that's why the Great Declaration about the gates of hell not being able to stand against the church no longer seems to apply as churches in the West decline and even die in many cases.

That's the bad news. What's the good news? Paul is clear. It's right in front of us. "Just think—you don't need a thing, you've got it all! All God's gifts are right in front of you as you wait expectantly for our Master Jesus to arrive on the scene for the Finale. And not only that, but God himself is right alongside to keep you steady and on track until things are all wrapped up by Jesus. God, who got you started in this spiritual adventure, shares with us the life of his Son and our Master Jesus. He will never give up on you. Never forget that." (1 Corinthians 1:7-9 MSG) If we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, He will hold us together when everything else in the world threatens to tear us apart.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Corinthians 5-8

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 25, 2023
Let's Talk about Sex

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 5-8 (audio reading)

Homer's Iliad. The poetry of Sappho and Ovid. Pindar's Odes. Plato's Symposium. The Sacred Band of Thebes. Horace's Odes. Without a doubt the Greek and Roman world was a highly eroticized one. Sexuality in all its forms was celebrated and embraced. Men were encouraged to build homoerotic relationships with young protégés. Homosexuality and lesbianism was known and commonly practiced. Temple prostitution was normalized as farmers slept with high priestesses to ensure the fertility of their crops for the coming year. Sexual promiscuity and adultery were not seen as taboo. Sexuality was a widespread theme permeating art, comedy, poetry, and philosophy. Sex was even used to bond men together in some of the great militaries of the period.

By contrast, Jews and Christians practiced sexual restraint. They saw sex as a sacred act that bonded one man with one woman for a lifetime. Created to symbolize the "one flesh" God intended for man and woman to experience with each other, Jews and Christians maintained a healthy respect for its power. This is why they established strong taboos against any sexual activity outside the bonds of covenant marriage. They recognized that sex was not purely physical but bonded people emotionally and spiritually as well. To disregard the depth of the sexual experience or share it with more than one partner was to commit a sin against one's own body which itself was a temple of the Holy Spirit. Sexual promiscuity was therefore intimately tied to ritual purity which is why transgressions took on a more serious tone.

The Apostle Paul was steeped in the Judeo-Christian world of sexual restraint. The Corinthian Christians were coming out of the Greco-Roman culture of sexual promiscuity. You can easily see where these two worlds would clash. Paul confronts the Corinthian believers with some of his strongest language yet. Calling for the excommunication of a man who slept with his father's wife. Commanding the Corinthians not to associate with the sexually immoral. Most certainly they should not avail themselves of the temple prostitutes and local fertility cults! At the same time, husbands should not deprive their wives of sex nor should wives do the same to their husbands. Celibacy is not God's design for marriage. I see this as Paul at his pastoral best. Applying the gospel to the complex social and cultural realities that existed in his particular part of the world.

What about us? Do these same principles hold true for us today? Absolutely. The Bible is univocal in both Old and New Testaments about the sanctity of the sexual relationship. It is to be shared between one man and one woman within the covenant of marriage over the course of a lifetime. Certainly one could point to deviations from this pattern throughout the Scriptures like the polygamy of the patriarchs. But those exceptions only serve to prove the rule. As Christians, we are called to sexual purity. We are called to sexual holiness. We are called to honor the sexual act as one of God's great gifts and thereby exercise it under His divine authority. In our current day and age, we are witnessing one of the great moral shifts in history. Western culture is becoming increasingly hyper-sexualized as it reverts back to ancient, pagan sexual norms. Sexual promiscuity has been on the rise since the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960's. Serial divorce is rampant. Same-sex relationships are celebrated. The concept of "throuples" is quickly being embraced as definitions of marriage shift and change. The impact of all this rapid change is devastating. Sexually transmitted disease. Unplanned pregnancies. Broken relationships. The objectification of the human body. Pornography. Harassment. Abuse. Violence. Depression. Anxiety. Fear. These are a lot of the reasons the Greco-Roman world embraced the Judeo-Christian sexual ethic in the first place! They could clearly see the positive impact on

families and communities who committed to practicing Biblical sexual restraint. Sadly, our world has no such examples as many Christians themselves do not seem committed to practicing sexual purity.

As our world rapidly plunges into sexual chaos, it is imperative for Christians to follow Paul's words to the Thessalonians that we read earlier this week, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God..." (1 Thessalonians 4:3-5) Lust is defined biblically as those emotions/passions that drive one to behavior outside the will of God. In the area of sexuality this means any sexual activity outside the covenant of marriage between one man and one woman.

All of us, no matter what our sexual orientation may be, suffer from the same disordered loves. Sexual desire, like all desires, were originally created good and pure by God but were corrupted by the Fall. As such, our desires are now in conflict with what God has clearly revealed in His Word and the only response for the Christian is to submit our sexuality to God like we are called to do in every other area of our life.

Readings for tomorrow: None

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 27, 2023
Keeping our Bearings

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 9-11 (audio reading)

I love how the Message version describes Paul's approach to ministry in our reading this morning. "Even though I am free of the demands and expectations of everyone, I have voluntarily become a servant to any and all in order to reach a wide range of people: religious, nonreligious, meticulous moralists, loose-living immoralists, the defeated, the demoralized—whoever. I didn't take on their way of life. I kept my bearings in Christ—but I entered their world and tried to experience things from their point of view. I've become just about every sort of servant there is in my attempts to lead those I meet into a God-saved life. I did all this because of the Message. I didn't just want to talk about it; I wanted to be in on it!" (1 Corinthians 9:19-23 MSG) Paul may be one of the most "free" persons to have ever lived. He refused to live by other's expectations. He refused to bow to other's demands. He refused to live one way when he was with the Jewish people and another when He was with the Gentiles. He refused to walk away from those who were struggling the most in life. He didn't every worry about his reputation. He simply kept his bearings in Christ.

"Bearing" is not necessarily a word we use often. It can mean many things but Paul is using it here to describe direction, orientation, heading, the trajectory of his life. He takes his bearing from Christ. Christ is the fixed point. Christ is his North Star. Everything he does is for the sake of knowing Christ and making Him known. There is no other calculus for Paul. There are no other factors in play. There are no other issues at stake. Christ is everything for Paul. And this allows him to maintain his "bearings" in the midst of a world of chaos, fear, and violence. Paul is very aware of how his life in Christ will set him apart. He's very aware of how his life in Christ will make him different. And yet, because Christ is his firm foundation, he is free to enter the world of the least reached and least resourced around him and experience things from their point of view. He is free to engage and interact with them in an effort to win them to saving faith. It's why he becomes a servant to all in order to save as many as he can.

What about us? Do we walk in the same freedom or do we worry too much about what others might say? Do we humbly seek to serve those around us, no matter their manner of life, in an effort to win them to Christ or do we hold back out of fear of the damage it might do to our reputation? Do we maintain our "bearings in Christ" as we navigate the challenges of this world or do we allow ourselves to be tossed about like a small ship on a raging ocean? Lean into Christ, friends. Make Him the fixed point of your life, your North Star, the firm foundation on which you stand.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Corinthians 12-14

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 28, 2023

A Humble Life

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 12-14 (audio reading)

One of the curses of our current age is self-righteousness. Whether we're talking politics or social issues or cultural norms or personality traits, there is this drive within all of us to be right in our own eyes. And this need to be right or righteous is elevated to an almost sacred level which means anyone who may disagree with us is wrong. And not just wrong but unrighteous which means they're evil. And if they're evil, they cannot be tolerated and must be destroyed. We see this dynamic on display in the rhetoric from many of our current political leaders who claim those who differ from them are out to "destroy democracy" or are enemies of America. This dynamic seems jet fueled by social media which only serves to channel outrage and hatred and anger. This, unsurprisingly, leads to violence and conflict which is justified if it serves your particular agenda but gets labeled an insurrection if it doesn't. One would think with all the information we have at our fingertips that we would humbly acknowledge the deep complexities of our world and other human beings. One would think because we all share the same fundamental nature that we would assume the best of one another rather than the worst. Sadly, this approach to life seems beyond us.

Of all people, Christians should understand the danger of self-righteousness. We should be the first to relinquish the need to be right in our own eyes. We understand, as the Apostle Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 13:12-13 MSG, that "We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist." This side of heaven, we don't have a clear view of ourselves much less the world around us. We can only see the outward appearance of a person, we cannot see their hearts. And this should create a deep sense of humility within all of us. A willingness to let go of the need to justify ourselves. A deep longing for the day when "the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then, see it all as clearly as God sees us, knowing him directly just as he knows us!" On that great day, every wrong will be righted...not by us but by God. Every injustice will be rectified...not by us but by God. Every tear will be wiped away...not by us but by God. It doesn't mean we shouldn't work for these things in the here and now - of course we should - it simply means we should approach these issues with humility, recognizing the deep complexities of the human condition that lead us to our choices.

I love how Paul describes the way we work for justice and righteousness in our world. He says, "But for right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love." Trust God. Always hope. And love as generously and lavishly and unconditionally as possible. What a great recipe for life! I know in my own life, things changed for the better in my marriage and with my kids when I decided to approach them with love rather than the law. When I let go of my need to be right and instead chose the way of love and encouragement and blessing. The arguments in my home went away. The conflict in my home died down. The tension and stress decreased significantly. It doesn't mean we don't speak the truth to each other. On the contrary, we have family meetings quite often where we have to talk about hard things. But we always do so with love first. We find ways to affirm and encourage first. We hug first. We seek to understand rather than be understood. We seek to meet the other person where they're at rather than demand they meet us where we're at. We recognize we don't often know all that's going on in that other person's heart and we give them room to express what they are feeling. Ultimately, we show each other a lot of grace and trust the Lord to do the work only He can do in each of our hearts.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Corinthians 15-16

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 29, 2023
Resurrection

Readings for today: 1 Corinthians 15-16 (audio reading)

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 truth 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 first-fruits 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 everything he has to face. He considers all of it nothing compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ. What about you? Do you believe in the resurrection?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Corinthians 1-4

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)

November 30, 2023
Eternal Impact

Readings for today: 2 Corinthians 1-4 (audio reading)

When I appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ at the end of my life or at the end of days (whichever comes first), I believe God is going to ask me a series of questions. What did you do with the woman I gave you as your wife? Did she become the woman I created her to be through her relationship with you? Did you love her and support and create an environment for her to thrive? What did you do with the children I entrusted to your care? Did they become the women and man I created them to be? Did you love them and support them and encourage them and create an environment for them to thrive? What about the congregation I entrusted to you? Did the people who called PEPC home become more like Christ under your leadership? Did you create an environment through your preaching and teaching and leading that gave them a chance to grow in their faith? Were you faithful in your meetings with them to love and encourage and confront and point them to My Son Jesus?

Why do I believe this? Because, like Paul, I believe all the relationships God has given me in my life are living “letters of recommendation.” The testimonies of my wife and children and congregation are all I need to rest secure in how God is using me to make an eternal impact for His Kingdom. I love how Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 3:4-6 MSG, “We couldn’t be more sure of ourselves in this—that you, written by Christ himself for God, are our letter of recommendation. We wouldn’t think of writing this kind of letter about ourselves. Only God can write such a letter. His letter authorizes us to help carry out this new plan of action. The plan wasn’t written out with ink on paper, with pages and pages of legal footnotes, killing your spirit. It’s written with Spirit on spirit, his life on our lives!” Though Paul faces hostility both outside and inside the church, he is secure in his mission. He is secure in his leadership. He knows he is in the center of God’s will because of the impact God used him to make on the lives of the Corinthian Christians. Despite all their brokenness and sin, the Corinthians have come to know Christ. They are growing in their faith. They are moving towards holiness. And this is all the encouragement Paul needs to keep going.

There is nothing better than being part of the Spirit’s work to change lives. There is no better feeling in the world than to be used by God to make an eternal impact in the lives of those we love. As I look back over the years, I am in awe of how God has used me to bless my parents and in-laws, my wife and children, and the families in the congregations I’ve had the privilege to serve. I am not perfect by any stretch. I’ve had to ask for forgiveness numerous times for the mistakes I’ve made. Thankfully, however, God has been faithful and as I’ve surrendered more and more to Him, He’s used me in ways I could never have imagined. What about you? How is God using you to make an impact on those you live with, live among, and work alongside? Ask Him today to show you how to be a blessing in all your relationships.

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Corinthians 5-9

[Back To Table Of Contents](#)