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December 1, 2023  
Weak Vessels

Readings for today: 2 Corinthians 5:9      (audio reading)

I'm still thinking about the reading from yesterday. The part about jars of clay. Ordinary pots in whom God deposits the treasure of the gospel. Or, as Paul puts it in today's reading, earthly bodies that get folded up like tents before being replaced with our eternal bodies. Until that great day comes, we endure the cramped conditions of this world with our eyes fixed on the vast spaces of the world to come. It's a powerful vision that gives us the strength to keep going no matter how much our "pot" might chip or crack or even break. Years ago, a dear friend gave me a clay pot that she purchased on a trip to the Middle East. She bought it from a local vendor who literally spent his days forming vessels out of clay and letting them bake in the sun before taking them to market to sell. It's simple. Ordinary. Fairly fragile. I imagine if I used it day in and day out like most people over in that part of the world, it would become chipped and cracked. Eventually it would break apart altogether.

I think about that pot every time I read Paul's words to the Corinthians. You and I are no different than the pot that sits on my desk. Simple. Ordinary. Fairly fragile. It doesn't take much to wound us. Hurt us. Chip us. Crack us. Break us. And yet God is His unsurpassed wisdom and grace has entrusted to us the treasure of the gospel. Through His Spirit He has deposited Christ into our hearts. And we now carry Him with us wherever we go.

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

We are weak and feeble. We are foolish and ignorant. We are anxious and afraid. Each one of our "jars" is chipped and cracked and broken in so many different ways. But when we see ourselves through the eyes of faith, we see past all the hurts, wounds, and scars to the treasure deposited within. We see the light of Christ shining through all our imperfections giving light and life and blessing to those around us. We understand that the "vessels" we inhabit are ultimately not what's most important. Rather it is Christ in us that is the hope of glory! So it doesn't matter what hardships we suffer or what injustices we face. We recognize this world has nothing for us. It is not our home. So we can spend our lives in service to Christ. We can wear these bodies out for the sake of Christ's mission in this world. We can exhaust our resources and our time and our energy. We can leave it all on the field so to speak, trusting there is a greater prize awaiting us in heaven. I love how Paul describes it, "For instance, we know that when these bodies of ours are taken down like tents and folded away, they will be replaced by resurrection bodies in heaven—God-made, not handmade—and we'll never have to relocate our "tents" again. Sometimes we can hardly wait to move—and so we cry out in frustration. Compared to what's coming, living conditions around here seem like a stopover in an unfurnished shack, and we're tired of it! We've been given a glimpse of the real thing, our true home, our resurrection bodies! The Spirit of God whets our appetite by giving us a taste of what's ahead. He puts a little of heaven in our hearts so that we'll never settle for less." (2 Corinthians 5:1-5 MSG)

Paul gets it. His whole life has prepared him for this moment. All his training. Upbringing. Wealth. Power. Privilege. All of it is now poured out like a drink offering before Christ. He must die so others

may live. He must give away all he has for the sake of those who do not know Jesus Christ. He must surrender all his needs, wants, and desires for the sake of the mission of proclaiming Christ. He understands the true worth of the treasure he carries inside and he lets his life become a living testimony to the surpassing power of Christ.

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

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Corinthians 10-13

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December 2, 2023  
Going Where No One has Gone Before...

Readings for today: 2 Corinthians 10-13      (audio reading)

I'm in Portland attending the annual board meeting for the Petros Network. One of the key verses that guides our work comes from the end of 2 Corinthians 10, "We aren't making outrageous claims here. We're sticking to the limits of what God has set for us. But there can be no question that those limits reach to and include you. We're not moving into someone else's "territory." We were already there with you, weren't we? We were the first ones to get there with the Message of Christ, right? So how can there be any question of overstepping our bounds by writing or visiting you? We're not barging in on the rightful work of others, interfering with their ministries, demanding a place in the sun with them. What we're hoping for is that as your lives grow in faith, you'll play a part within our expanding work. And we'll all still be within the limits God sets as we proclaim the Message in countries beyond Corinth. But we have no intention of moving in on what others have done and taking credit for it. "If you want to claim credit, claim it for God." What you say about yourself means nothing in God's work. It's what God says about you that makes the difference." (2 Corinthians 10:13-18 MSG) We aspire to the same mission Paul aspired to. He wanted to take the gospel to places where it had never gone. He refused to spend his life planting and sowing and reaping in the same harvest fields of others. He wanted everyone to have access to the gospel. I love his heart. I love how Paul sees the whole world as his parish and yet recognizes that even he has limits. He knows he is not the end all, be all of God's mission. God isn't just using him but a host of others - a great crowd of witnesses - to accomplish His great work. The work of the Kingdom is not driven by celebrity. It is never a one man or one woman show. Paul isn't interested in competing in areas where others have had gospel influence. He isn't interested in extending his brand. He has no desire to promote himself. He simply wants to go to those places where the gospel hasn't been preached and he knows it will take the entire Body of Christ to make that dream a reality.

Sadly, I see the opposite attitude at work in the American church today. Rather than ask ourselves if communities already have a gospel presence, we focus more on our brand. It could be a denominational brand. It could be a non-denominational brand. The rise of the multi-site church is a classic example of this phenomenon. The goal is to build the largest platform possible and it doesn't matter how many smaller churches are cannibalized along the way. We desperately need a reset. We've masked entrepreneurialism as "church planting" and it's literally killing the American church. We plant churches whose leaders have little if any accountability and they are failing and falling in seemingly record numbers. Numerical growth is used to justify all kinds of pastoral abuse and neglect and it must break the heart of God. He must weep as He watches His children compete against each other rather than expand their areas of influence into regions where the gospel has never been heard.

Over the past several years, I've had a front row seat to this mess. I've been approached by large mega-churches asking me to come under their "brand" to reach the front range of Colorado. I've been told by Pentecostal churches that the Lord had anointed them - and their pastor - to bring revival to my church and my community. I've been hit up for money by church planters who are planting in communities that are saturated with gospel-centered churches more times than I can count. Through it all, I keep coming back to Paul's words above and have done my best to remain true to that mission.

If only the American church could recapture a vision to truly reach the lost. To go to communities where there is no gospel presence. To go to the places of greatest need where the chances of "building a platform" for ourselves don't exist. If only we were gripped by the idea that no one has the right to hear

the gospel twice while there remains some who have yet to hear it once. (Oswald Smith) Then we might see revival come. Then we might see the church become the light of the world as she was created and called to be.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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**December 4, 2023**  
**True Faith**

Readings for today: [Acts 20:1-3, Romans 1-4](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

What is true faith? What does it mean to believe? Many point to the definition out of Hebrews 11:1, “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” That’s a good one for sure. In recent years, I’ve come to rely on one that comes from Romans 4:20-22, “No unbelief made Abraham waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.” That part in the italics is always what gets me. Am I fully convinced God is able to do what He’s promised in Jesus Christ? In other words, am I fully convinced the sacrifice of Christ is enough to save sinners like me? Am I fully convinced Jesus’ blood is enough to cover all my sins? Am I fully convinced there is nothing left for me to do? Nothing left for me to achieve? Nothing left for me to earn? Am I fully convinced it is by God’s grace alone that I am saved? Am I fully convinced of these things? What Christians historically have called the truths of the gospel?

Paul was convinced the gospel was literally the power of God. Powerful enough to save Jew and Gentile alike. Powerful enough to hold them together when everything in the world threatened to tear them apart. Powerful enough to bring the dead back to life. Powerful enough to bring light to dark places. Powerful enough to break the chains of sin that enslave us. Powerful enough to destroy the works of the devil. Like Abraham before him, Paul was fully convinced God was able to do what He had promised and this is why his faith is counted to him as righteousness. It wasn’t because Paul knew more Scripture than anyone else. It wasn’t because Paul planted more churches than anyone else. It wasn’t because Paul suffered more than anyone else. This isn’t what constituted the ground of Paul’s faith. No, Paul believed God. Paul trusted God. Paul never wavered when it came to God’s promises. He knew God would always deliver which is what made it easy for him to place his life in God’s hands.

What about you? Do you trust in trust in the promises of God? Are you fully convinced God is able to do what He’s promised? Do you believe God will do what He says He will do? Provide like He says He will provide? Protect like He says He will protect? Redeem like He says He will redeem? Love like He says He will love? Bless like He says He will bless? Forgive like He says He will forgive? God makes so many promises throughout the Bible and He’s made good on every single one. God’s delivered on His promises over and over again throughout history. In fact, one might even argue the Bible is a written record of God’s faithfulness throughout the generations.

Readings for tomorrow: Romans 5-8

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**December 5, 2023**  
**Expanding our View**

Readings for today: [Romans 5-8](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

My view of life can be so narrow at times. I am limited by my lack of understanding. Limited by my lack of experience. Limited by my finite abilities. Limited by my emotions. Limited by the sin that so easily trips me up. All of these things and more conspire to narrow my field of vision. Foreclose on options I otherwise might consider. Shot down possibilities I might otherwise take advantage of. Close doors I might otherwise walk through. I've seen it happen in my life. I've seen it happen in the lives of those I love and serve as a pastor.

Recently, I was talking with a friend who is locked in conflict with their spouse. Neither of them can see the forest for the trees. Both of them are locked into a particular point of view. Their field of vision has narrowed to the point where their "way" is the only "way" they can see. It may end up destroying their marriage. I was talking to another friend who is frustrated with a colleague at work. They are wrestling with all kinds of emotions. They are battling their fears and anxieties and assumptions. When they let these things get the upper hand, they start to feel like the situation is hopeless. They start to believe the lie that there's no way forward. Their vision begins to narrow unnecessarily and options they might otherwise consider no longer seem to be in play. It's amazing how often we fall into this trap as human beings. It's part of our sinful, broken condition and it impacts us all.

This is why I love what Paul shares in Romans 5 today. Listen to how the Message version translates it, "By entering through faith into what God has always wanted to do for us—set us right with him, make us fit for him—we have it all together with God because of our Master Jesus. And that's not all: We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand—out in the wide open spaces of God's grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise." (Romans 5:1-2 MSG) I love the language of "wide open spaces of God's grace and glory." All kinds of images flash through my mind when I read these words. Summitting a 14'er here in Colorado and being able to see for miles. Standing on the Great Plains and seeing the wheat fields stretch out before me in every direction. Looking out the window of a plane and being able to see entire cities come into view. This is the difference between God's view and my view. His view is unlimited, mine is limited. His view is infinite, mine is finite. His view is unobstructed, mine is obstructed by all kinds of tension and stress and anxiety and fear and sinful desires that I struggle with almost every day.

Friends, God wants us to give us His eyes to see. His ears to hear. His heart to understand all that is going on in the world around us. He wants to expand our view, not only of our own lives, but the lives of those we love and live among and work alongside. He wants us to live in the wide open spaces of grace rather than the cramped spaces of sin. He wants us to live in freedom rather than in slavery. He wants us to see all the possibilities and all the opportunities He has prepared for us. He has promised to do more than we can ever ask or imagine! All He asks us that we let go of our hopes and dreams - which are small and petty by comparison - and turn our lives over to Him.

Readings for tomorrow: Romans 9-12

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December 6, 2023  
Trusting God

Readings for today: Romans 9-12      (audio reading)

One of the biggest questions one has to grapple with in reading the Bible has to do with the nature and character of God. Is He a God who can be trusted? Is He a good God? A righteous God? A holy God? If one concludes the answer to these questions is “Yes”, then these narratives begin to make sense. If one concludes the answer to these questions is “No” or “Not sure”, then these narratives get messy and really difficult to understand. Why does God allow Noah to curse his grandson for something his father did? Why does God seem to overlook Abraham’s lying? Why does God turn Lot’s wife into a pillar of salt simply for a glance backwards and yet seemingly does nothing to Lot’s daughters when they rape their father to get pregnant? How could God allow Hagar and Ishmael to be treated so terribly by Sarah? And what are we to make of the conflict between Esau and Jacob which began before they were even born?

These are all honest, real questions that should be raised by any reflective, thoughtful, engaged Christians. They press us to the primary question which has undergirded our entire journey through the Bible this year...Will we let God be God? Can we agree His ways are higher than our ways and His thoughts higher than our thoughts? Can we agree that in standing outside of time and space, He has a perspective we can never grasp? Can we agree that God is infinite in wisdom and understanding? Omniscient and omnipotent? Again, will we let God be God? Will we trust His sovereign decision to choose Israel and not the other nations? Will we trust His sovereign plan to use Israel for the sake of the other nations? Will we trust His sovereign decision to use this particular family, the family of Abraham, with all of its baggage and dysfunction?

This is essentially what the Apostle Paul says we should do in our reading from Romans today. “Who in the world do you think you are to second-guess God? Do you for one moment suppose any of us knows enough to call God into question? Clay doesn’t talk back to the fingers that mold it, saying, “Why did you shape me like this?” Isn’t it obvious that a potter has a perfect right to shape one lump of clay into a vase for holding flowers and another into a pot for cooking beans?” (Romans 9:20-21 MSG) Now, does this mean we can’t ask our questions? Is Paul trying to shame us all into silence? I don’t think so. He simply calls us to place our faith in the character and nature of God. He calls us to faith rather than doubt when it comes to the goodness and faithfulness of God. He calls us to believe God has a plan, even when we don’t understand it.

All of this is running in the background when Paul writes his letter to the Roman Christians. Essentially, he argues that when we let God be God, everything else falls into place. We can look back into the Old Testament and see the guidance of God as He leads the servant of Abraham miraculously to Rebekah. We see the hand of God as Abraham settles his estate and dies peacefully among his people. His funeral attended by his two boys, Ishmael and Isaac, who reunite to bury their father in what must have been a tender scene. We see both Ishmael and Isaac receive the blessing of God as their families grow. We see God heal Rebekah’s barren womb in what will become a pattern throughout the Old Testament. We witness the sovereign choice of God to elect Jacob to carry on the promise even though Esau is the firstborn. We see Esau confirm that decision as he despises his birthright, selling it to Jacob for a bowl of stew. Finally, we see God renew His covenant with Isaac, almost immediately followed by Isaac’s repetition of the same mistakes his father had made. Time and again we are reminded that unless God acts to preserve His promise, we are doomed. The human race is just too dysfunctional. Too prone to evil. To easily seduced by sin.

This should challenge us as well as comfort us. God calls us into relationship with Himself because He wants to use us as His instruments to fill the earth with His glory. And this demands something of us. Actually, it demands everything from us! At the same time, the successful completion of God's plan doesn't depend on human effort. Again, I love what Paul says in Romans 9:16, "Compassion doesn't originate in our bleeding hearts or moral sweat, but in God's mercy." (Romans 9:16 MSG) Thankfully, God is moving ahead of us, always with His plan in mind. And as we link arms with Him, align our will with His will, the Kingdom of God comes on earth as it is in heaven.

Readings for tomorrow: Romans 13-16

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**December 7, 2023**  
**Everything Points to Love**

Readings for today: [Romans 13-16](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

I spend a lot of my days talking to people who are exploring what it means to follow Christ. They ask a lot of great questions. They wrestle with significant doubts. They are honest about their fears. One of the most common questions I get has to do with the Christian's relationship with the law. The law of God is complicated. There's much about it that feels foreign, mainly because it was written originally to a people living in the ancient near east. There's much about it that has changed over time especially as it relates to the civil and ceremonial sections of the law. And then there is the moral dimension that remains consistent and eternal. It's not always easy to tease out. It's not always easy to understand. It's not always easy to grasp. As a result, the most important part is often lost and that is love. The end of the law is love. The purpose of the law is to protect love and foster love. The goal of the law is the creation of an alternative society marked by love.

Listen to how the Apostle Paul puts it, "Don't run up debts, except for the huge debt of love you owe each other. When you love others, you complete what the law has been after all along. The law code—don't sleep with another person's spouse, don't take someone's life, don't take what isn't yours, don't always be wanting what you don't have, and any other "don't" you can think of—finally adds up to this: Love other people as well as you do yourself. You can't go wrong when you love others. When you add up everything in the law code, the sum total is love." (Romans 13:8-10 MSG) Love others as you love yourself. This is the summary of the law of God. This is why the law of God exists. This is what the law of God is seeking to encourage and foster in the hearts of those who are faithful. The law of God sets healthy boundaries around the lives of believers. Those who commit to following the law with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength do not earn God's favor. They don't work their way to heaven. No, they become the kind of people God created them to be all along. They become healthy and whole and kind and generous and selfless and patient. Most of all, they embody love. Love of God. Love of others. Love of neighbors. Love even of their enemies.

Everything points to love. All 613 laws in the Old Testament seek to foster an environment where love flourishes. Every law Jesus Himself affirms when He reinterprets Torah in the Sermon on the Mount is directed towards love. The Greatest Commandment is all about love and the Second Great Commandment proclaims the same. All of it love. All of it from God. Because God is love. At the end of the day, the true test of any Christian is how we love. Love God. Love others. Love ourselves. Following God's law is the way to the deepest and most fulfilling love imaginable.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 20:4-23:35

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**December 8, 2023**  
**Complete Surrender**

Readings for today: [Acts 20:4-23:35](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

What does total surrender to Christ look like? It looks like the Apostle Paul. Paul leaves his home. His friendships. His business. His ministry all behind in order to suffer for Christ. He was compelled by the Holy Spirit to return to Jerusalem where he knew he would be put in chains. Prophecy after prophecy had been made. Warning after warning had been given. There was no more dangerous place for Paul to go and yet he went. Not out of pride or arrogance but out of obedience to His Lord. It was Jesus who sent him to testify in Jerusalem and it would be Jesus who would send him to testify in Rome. From the heart of Judaism to the heart of the empire. Paul was Jesus' chosen instrument to declare the good news of the gospel in front of kings and rulers and authorities. Though it would eventually cost him his life, Paul considered it a privilege to serve.

I have met many “Apostle Paul’s” in my life. Men and women who sacrifice everything for the sake of the gospel. They leave their homes. Their families. Their friendships. Their businesses. And they go to faraway places. Towns and villages who have never heard the name of Jesus. They place themselves in danger. They endure persecution. Many of them will bear the scars for the rest of their lives. Some of them even lose their lives. Why do they do it? They feel compelled by the Holy Spirit. Constrained by His will to go to the places He shows them in order to share Christ with those who are lost. They do not act of pride or arrogance. They do not trust in their own resources or strength. They are not naive or ignorant. They go with the understanding that they may not return. But they cannot help themselves. It is Jesus who commands them. It is Jesus who sends them. It is Jesus who calls them into the harvest field. They are Jesus' chosen instruments to make His gospel known among a people who have never heard. They preach in places that do not show up on any map. They cross borders into places where the gospel has never gone. They confront principalities and powers we cannot fathom, armed only with the gospel. And though it costs them their health. Their wealth. Their family. Sometimes their lives. They consider it a privilege and honor to serve.

All of us are called by Jesus. All of us are sent by Jesus. All of us have a field to harvest for our Lord. Sadly, too many of us never show up for work. Our fields are wild and overgrown. They have gone untended for far too many years. Sure, we mean well. We think we'll get to it one day. Once we're financially secure. Once our kids are grown. Once we get married and settle down. Or we work the edges of the field. Close to the gate. In the places where it's safest. After all, we wouldn't want to place ourselves at risk, right? God wants us to be safe, right? He would never call us to sacrifice our comfort or lifestyle or livelihood or family or friendships for the sake of His mission, right? Isn't the dangerous work reserved for the truly holy? The super Christians? Surely that's not me. Surely that's not what Jesus wants me to do.

The Word of God is clear. It leaves us very little wiggle room. All that we have been given. All that we've earned over the course of our lives. All our success. All our wealth. All our possessions. All our relationships. All our friendships. Everything in our lives must be surrendered and laid at the feet of our Lord. It has come from His hands and must be returned to Him. This is the price of following Jesus. We relinquish it all. We surrender it all. We let go of it all and walk with open hands and open hearts before Him. Our first call is to serve Jesus. Nothing more. Nothing less. Nothing else is allowed to get in the way. Not our families. Not our careers. Not our friendships. Not our possessions. Not our retirement. Not our fears. Not our failures. Not our anxieties. Not our worries. Not our doubts. Not our questions. Nothing. Jesus is Lord. When He calls me, I will answer. Where He sends me, I will go. I am Jesus'

chosen instrument to make His will known in my community and to the ends of the earth. And it is a privilege and honor to serve.

Readings for tomorrow: Acts 24-26

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**December 9, 2023**  
**Resurrection = Life without Fear**

Readings for today: [Acts 24-26](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

Everything for Paul hinges on the resurrection. When he met the Risen Christ outside of Damascus, a door opened in his heart that could never be closed. He was transformed. Suddenly all his zeal and passion for the Law was re-focused as he realized everything the prophets foretold had come true in Christ. His hope as a Pharisee for the eventual resurrection of the dead had actually taken place in his lifetime. Jesus was the first fruits. He was the forerunner. He was the Messiah whom God had sent. And with this knowledge, all the tumblers fall into place. Jesus is the key that makes sense of the Law and Prophets. Jesus is the filter now through which all of Scripture should be read and understood. The Risen Christ brings new life and new meaning to everything Paul had learned over the course of his lifetime. And with this knowledge Paul is transformed from a violent, raging Pharisee intent on destroying Christianity to its foremost evangelist, pastor, and theologian.

Of course, wrapping your life around the resurrection will not make you popular. Paul found himself at odds with the Romans who believed he was nuts. Paul found himself at odds with his former friends and colleagues in Judaism who tried to have him killed. Paul even found himself at odds - as we have already seen - with some of his fellow Christians who could not grasp the depths of his message of unconditional love and grace. Living the resurrection life will certainly make you strange. Weird. Odd. Because your values and priorities and thoughts and attitudes and actions are shaped by another Kingdom. A Kingdom not of this world. Ruled by a King who is not of this world. Submitting your life to Him means living an “other-worldly” life. A life not ruled by fear. A life not centered around self. A life untangled and unencumbered by the cares and worries of this world.

Can you imagine living a life without fear? That’s the life Jesus offers. The resurrection life. Resurrection places us beyond the fears of this world. No longer do we fear death. No longer do we fear danger. No longer do we fear hunger or nakedness or prison or sickness. No longer do we fear the loss of possessions, reputation, position and privilege. No longer do we fear failure or pain or suffering. These “fears” are what the world uses to keep us in line. Squeeze us into its mold. Shape us into its corrupt image. But the resurrection sets us free from all of that! Now we are transformed as our hearts and minds are renewed by the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit that raised Christ Jesus from the dead now lives in us and is at work through us! This is what Paul understood. This is what Peter understood. This is what millions of Christians have understood throughout history and it is why the Kingdom of God continues to move with power on the earth.

Readings for tomorrow: None

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**December 11, 2023**  
**The End of the Story?**

Readings for today: [Acts 27-28](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

The Book of Acts ends with the Apostle Paul living under house arrest in Rome awaiting trial before Caesar for his faith in Jesus Christ and his belief in the resurrection. During that time, he seems to enjoy a bit of freedom. He's able to teach and preach. He welcomes visitors regularly into his home. And he never stops sharing the gospel. He knows his time is growing short. He knows he's about to finish his race. He knows his life has been poured out as an offering before the Lord. And even though many scholars, including myself, believe Paul was released from house arrest, set free by Caesar at this point, and continued his missionary endeavors for another couple of years; it won't be too much longer before Emperor Nero goes insane, rounds up the Christians, persecutes them terribly, and eventually imprisons Paul in the infamous Mamertine Prison which was essentially a dark hole in the ground where political prisoners were kept before being executed.

Through it all, Paul remains faithful. As you read these final chapters of Acts, Paul seems completely oblivious to his fate. Almost like he doesn't care what happens to him. Paul has settled in his heart that to "live is Christ and to die is gain" so no matter what comes, he is content. He is perhaps the most free person in history. Free from the cares and worries of this world. Free from the need to jockey for position or power. Free from the need to be successful. Free from the need to be comfortable and safe. Just as the boat he was on was tossed about on the waves of the sea before shipwrecking on Malta, his life is being tossed about by the power of the Holy Spirit. He is no longer under control. He is not the master of his fate. He is not the captain of his destiny. He has embraced his Lord fully and completely and surrendered all into his hands.

It's tempting to get to the end of Acts and think we've come to the end of the story. Not so fast! There is a 29th chapter being written even as we speak! The generations that have come after the Apostle Paul and the other leaders of the early church risked their lives in many cases - just like Paul - to carry the gospel around the globe. They too were filled with power as the Holy Spirit came upon them. They too were Jesus' witnesses in their own Jerusalems, Judreas, Samarias, and to the furthest corners of the earth. Almost 2000 years have elapsed since Paul walked the earth. In that time, billions of people have come to saving faith in Jesus Christ. Revivals have broken out at different times and in different places all over the world. Indeed, the story of the Book of Acts will not be complete until Jesus returns because the "Acts" the book refers to are the acts of the Holy Spirit not the acts of the apostles. Their actions ended with their deaths. The acts of the Holy Spirit continue to this day and you and I get to be part of it!

Readings for tomorrow: Philippians 1-4

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**December 12, 2023**  
**The Prayers God Loves**

Readings for today: [Philippians 1-4](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

If you are like me, prayer isn't always easy. It's hard to know what to say to the Lord of the universe. What do you tell someone who already knows everything? How do you talk to someone who doesn't always talk back? At least in an audible way? What do you do when it feels like your prayers are bouncing off the ceiling or you can't seem to find the right words or you feel like you're just going through the motions? For me, that's when it's time to go back to the Scriptures and read over the kinds of prayers God's people have been praying for centuries.

The first one that comes to mind is the Lord's Prayer, of course. The Psalms are next as they express the full range of human emotions and can help us find our "voice" again. But then you run across prayers like the one we read out of Philippians today. I love it. Listen to it from the Message version, "So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Live a lover's life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God." (Philippians 1:9-11 MSG) Isn't that awesome? Paul is literally in prison, potentially awaiting his death, and how does he spend his time? He's praying for his brothers and sisters in Philippi to increase in love. I can think of no better prayer to pray!

Paul is an amazing man. As you read Philippians today, listen to how little Paul thinks of himself. From a human perspective, he has every right to complain. Every right to demand justice from God like Job. Every right to be angry with where his life has ended up. After all, has he not given up everything to follow Christ? And this is his reward? Thankfully, Paul left the "human perspective" behind a long time ago. He now sees the world as Christ sees it. It's why he calls the Philippians to have the mind of Christ. It's why he can say to them that to "live is Christ and to die is gain." It's why he points them to the love of Christ even as he languishes in a prison cell awaiting execution. Paul lives a "lover's life" to the very end. He never stops preaching. Never stops making Jesus Christ attractive to everyone he meets. He wants everyone to get involved "in the glory and praise of God." And for that great end, he is willing to give his life.

I still remember going to Africa for the very first time. Meeting church planters in some of the most remote areas on earth who also lived "a lover's life." Like Paul, they too were willing to sacrifice everything for the privilege of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. I was changed by that encounter. My life has never been the same. I came back with a renewed desire to lay down my life for my wife, my children, my family, and my church. Most importantly, I came back with a passion to give my life to God and His great mission in our world. The mission of love. And God has answered my prayers. He gives me opportunities every day to share Christ with those around me. I wouldn't want my life to be any other way.

Readings for tomorrow: Philemon, Colossians 1-4

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**December 13, 2023**  
**The End of Slavery**

Readings for today: [Philemon, Colossians 1-4](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

The Bible has often been used to justify the horrors of slavery. Southern slave owners and their preachers in the 18th and 19th centuries proof-texted from all over the Scriptures to justify their crimes. Even well-known pastors and theologians like Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield were blind to the sin of slave-holding. Many over the years cite these examples as reasons not to believe the claims of Christianity. After all, if Christianity is the “slaveholders” religion then surely it’s not worth following. I’d agree. At the same time, the Bible birthed the abolitionist movement. Christians like William Wilberforce, John Wesley, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Charles Spurgeon, Charles Finney, and many others relied on passages like the ones we read today from Philemon and Colossians as they launched and organized a movement that put an end to the Atlantic slave trade and brought an end to the practice of slavery in the United States altogether. Furthermore, Christians remain on the forefront of the abolitionist movement to this day through organizations like the International Justice Mission as they battle slavery in all its forms around the world.

In my opinion, the Apostle Paul doesn’t get near enough credit for how radical he must have sounded to his contemporaries. As we’ve said throughout this year, though the Bible was written for us, it was not written to us. And Paul was preaching and writing and theologizing at a time when almost one-third of the world was enslaved. Slavery was normative in Paul’s day. It was part of the economic fabric of the empires of the ancient world. The idea that every human being was made in the image of God and therefore all human beings equal in the eyes of God was radical and far-reaching and had yet to fully take hold. Aristotle himself believed that some people were born to be kings and some were born to be slaves and this was just the natural order of things. And then along came this fiery little apostle whose life had been transformed by his encounter with the Risen Christ and what he preached and taught literally turned the world upside down.

Listen again to what Paul writes to Philemon about his runaway slave, Onesimus. “Maybe it’s all for the best that you lost him for a while. You’re getting him back now for good—and no mere slave this time, but a true Christian brother! That’s what he was to me—he’ll be even more than that to you.” (Philemon 1:15-16 MSG) Paul’s vision of the Kingdom subverts and undermines every other kingdom on earth. His understanding of the ways of God’s Kingdom radically de-centers all natural human relationships. He upends cultural norms by pressing those he loves deeper into the ethics of Jesus. Philemon has come to Christ under Paul’s preaching. He himself was set free from slavery to sin and death in the name of Jesus and should therefore rejoice and embrace the emancipation of his former slave Onesimus now that he too has become a believer. This is the key for Paul. Because Christ has set us free, we must be about the business of setting others free. Spiritual realities should lead to physical and cultural realities. They are not separate entities.

Listen to how he describes it to the Christians in Colossae. “God rescued us from dead-end alleys and dark dungeons. He’s set us up in the kingdom of the Son he loves so much, the Son who got us out of the pit we were in, got rid of the sins we were doomed to keep repeating.” (Colossians 1:13-14 MSG) In other words, Christ has set us free. We are no longer slaves to fear. No longer slaves to sin. No longer slaves to the evil one. As a result, every relationship we have in this life is no longer bound by the rules of this world. No longer bound by the cultural practices of this world. No longer subservient to the ways of this world. Relationships are no longer about power or honor or shame or guilt. They are about love and freedom and service. All because we have become new creations in Christ. This is why

Paul addresses the core relationships of his day when he talks about marriage and family and work. “Wives, understand and support your husbands by submitting to them in ways that honor the Master. Husbands, go all out in love for your wives. Don’t take advantage of them. Children, do what your parents tell you. This delights the Master no end. Parents, don’t come down too hard on your children or you’ll crush their spirits. Servants, do what you’re told by your earthly masters...Keep in mind always that the ultimate Master you’re serving is Christ...And masters, treat your servants considerately. Be fair with them. Don’t forget for a minute that you, too, serve a Master—God in heaven.” (Colossians 3:18-4:1 MSG) Paul is not reinforcing existing power dynamics here. He is helping the believers see that they are set free to serve so this world no longer has a hold on them.

Fast forward to our day. How does this same principle apply? Well, the world seems hellbent on the accumulation of wealth and power and influence and control. Christians push the opposite direction. Because we have been set free from the principalities and powers of this present darkness, we are free to give and share and serve and love. In this way, we are still about the business of setting people free.

Readings for tomorrow: Ephesians 1-4

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December 14, 2023  
Rich and Full

Readings for today: [Ephesians 1-4](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

Rich and full. That's how I describe my life to others. A friend of mine asked me the other day why I don't ever tell anyone how busy I am. After all, he is a close enough friend to know the demands on my time. He knows how hard I run. He knows I pastor a church, teach seminary, train indigenous church planters internationally, and serve my denomination. He knows I have four children, all of whom are moving into adulthood. He knows I have aging parents and other family commitments. He knows I have a strong marriage of almost thirty years. He knows all this and yet he also knows how much I love my life. He can see in the way I live and lead how grateful I am for everything I have been given. So when he asked me why I never tell others I'm "busy", I shared with him it's because "busyness" is something we largely choose for ourselves. After all, I don't have to do everything I do. I could easily step back from some of my commitments to get more time back in my life. Most people I know use "busyness" as an excuse or claim "busyness" as a complaint when, in fact, they are responsible for the choices they've made that create the "busy" conditions of their lives. And because I believe this, I choose to look at my life more positively. My life is "rich and full" and I wouldn't change a thing about it. It doesn't mean there aren't hard seasons or tough moments but those are to be expected in a fallen world. I choose to lean into Christ. I choose to lean into love.

That's probably why I love the words from the Apostle Paul in today's reading from the Message version of the Bible. In response to the "busyness" of his life, Paul says, "my response is to get down on my knees before the Father, this magnificent Father who parcels out all heaven and earth. I ask him to strengthen you by his Spirit—not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength—that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in. And I ask him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you'll be able to take in with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God. God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us." (Ephesians 3:14-20 MSG) Isn't that a beautiful vision of the Christian life? Both feet firmly planted on love. Taking in all the extravagant dimensions of God's grace. Living full lives in the fullness of God.

Does that describe your life? Why not? After all, God can do anything. Far more than you can imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! Do you believe Him? Do you trust Him? Of course, a full life with God doesn't mean there won't be challenges or obstacles to overcome. It doesn't mean there won't be trials and temptations. It simply means these things, by and large, won't gain a foothold in your life. They won't be able to gain any purchase. They won't cling to you or define you or hold you back. Instead, you will be filled with God's love and grace and mercy and peace in ways that pass all understanding.

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

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December 15, 2023  
Imitate God

Readings for today: Ephesians 5-6, Titus 1-3      (audio reading)

A basic question I am often asked is how to live a life that is pleasing to God. A life that is open to God. A life that is surrendered to God. People want to know what it means in the everyday to follow Christ. What does it mean to live a godly life? What does it mean to have a godly marriage? What does it mean to raise godly children? Work towards godly ends in our vocation? These are all great questions to ask as we think about what it means to be a Christian. Is it just a set of beliefs about God? An abstract theological system we ascribe to? A set of laws we have to obey? I prefer the way Paul describes it in the Book of Ephesians...

“Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn’t love in order to get something from us but to give everything of himself to us. Love like that.” (Ephesians 5:1-2 MSG)

It starts with our perception of God. Is He a distant tyrant that exercises His rule over our lives whether we like it or not? Is He a loving Father who wants to bless and give good gifts to His children? If you lean towards the former, then the temptation will be to try to measure up. Try to prove yourself. White-knuckle your faith with an iron will and rigid self-discipline. If you lean towards the latter, you are set free to follow the example God sets for us in Jesus Christ. You can learn to imitate Him. Especially in love. As you walk with Him and talk with Him and spend time with Him, He promises to teach you a life of love. Extravagant. Abundant. Generous. Overflowing. This is the love of God and the love He wants us to walk in every single day. It is this love that should mark every relationship. It is this love that drives us to serve and submit to one another. It is this love that inspires obedience to His will. It is this love that changes how we parent, how we work, how we retire, and how we spend our free time. We don’t love to get anything from others, we love in order to give ourselves away. This is the secret to living a life pleasing to God.

Where do you find yourself imitating God in your life right now? Where is it easy? Where is it hard? What challenges do you face along the way? Are there certain people in your life that you find it hard to love? Lean into Christ. Follow His example. Rather than withhold love or keep the person at arm’s length or cut them out of your life, love even more deeply. Love even more fully. Love even more extravagantly. Love in a healthy, honest, transparent way. This is the way Jesus loved.

Readings for tomorrow: 1 Timothy 1-6

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December 16, 2023  
Living Proof

Readings for today: 1 Timothy 1-6      (audio reading)

My life is living proof that God can save anyone. I was truly walking in darkness before the light of Christ changed my life. I was depressed. I was lonely. I was anxious and fearful. I was broken in all sorts of ways. My future was bleak. The walls of my life were closing in on me. I was locked in a downward spiral and didn't have the strength or the fortitude or the wisdom to know how to pull myself out. I was lost. It certainly didn't have to be that way. I had faithful parents who took me to church every Sunday. I was an honor student. An all-state athlete. An Eagle Scout. A leader in our youth group and soloist in the church choir. But I was living a double life. My inner world did not match my outer world. And that's what led to my collapse in college. My heart was hardened to the gospel. My selfishness and pride and addictions to achievement and success had killed off any possibility of faith. I was on a rapid descent into a deep, dark pit and that's when the Lord reached down and saved me. He lifted me up. Set my feet on solid ground. Gave me a new song to sing. Changed my heart and my life forever.

The Apostle Paul had a similar experience and I love how he describes it to Timothy. "Here's a word you can take to heart and depend on: Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. I'm proof—Public Sinner Number One—of someone who could never have made it apart from sheer mercy. And now he shows me off—evidence of his endless patience—to those who are right on the edge of trusting him forever." (1 Timothy 1:15-16 MSG) Paul saw himself as the chief of sinners. He was public enemy number one on Christ's hit list. He was the greatest enemy of the redeemed. He was seeking them out. Dragging them out of their homes and putting them in jail. He placed them on trial and sought their execution. He believed with all his heart that Christianity represented an existential threat to Judaism so he did all he could to combat the rise of this new faith. Not only that but Paul was a Pharisee. He believed with all his heart that if he remained faithful to the covenant, maintained the traditions of his ancestors, kept Torah and taught others to do the same that he would be declared righteous before God. Meeting the Risen Christ on the road outside Damascus radically changed Paul. Everything he thought he once knew went out the window as the amazing grace of God took hold of him.

From that point forward, Paul understood his life was to be lived in a very public way before the world. He was a living testimony to God's grace. A living demonstration of God's power to change even the hardest of hearts and the most rebellious of sinners. Everywhere he went, God "showed him off" as "evidence of His endless patience" to those who were considering placing their faith in Christ. I feel the same way. It's why I live as transparently as possible. It's why I share openly about my life as often as I do. Every bit of my life - the good, bad, and ugly - is all evidence of God's great mercy and grace. I have nothing to call my own. I've done nothing on my own. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners and I was standing in the front of that line. Now my life is His to command. My steps are His to direct. All of my brokenness He puts on display to demonstrate the power of His grace to save even the worst of sinners. What about you? Is your life a demonstration of the grace of God? Do you understand the depths from which Christ saved you and the heights to which Christ has brought you?

Readings for tomorrow: None

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December 18, 2023  
The Tyranny of Self

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

We find ourselves in the midst of a massive cultural shift. For a millennia or more, Western Culture has largely aspired to the ethics of Jesus. He was the gold standard. His teachings formed the bedrock of our moral, religious, political, and legal codes. The way He lived provided the definition of the “good life.” Yes, we never got there. Yes, there were many abuses along the way. Yes, there many times and seasons and even decades and centuries where the West engaged in gross and even monstrous hypocrisy. But the way of Jesus remained the governing paradigm for a life well-lived. Sadly, this is no longer the case. Many now believe the way of Jesus to be outdated and old-fashioned. Many believe the way of Jesus to be phobic and abusive. Many believe the way of Jesus to be immoral and even evil. Why the change?

Human beings are naturally oriented towards “self.” We are naturally focused on making sure our wants, needs, and desires are satisfied. In this way, we are naturally “selfish.” Meaning we are self-focused. Self-absorbed. Self-protective. Self-promoting. This makes perfect sense when one stops to think about it. After all, we live in a world that violent and painful and full of injustice and evil and suffering. In such a world, we have to look out for number one because no one else will do it for us. We have to naturally look out for ourselves and guard our hearts and minds and protect our resource and assets or we might become victim to all sorts of nefarious, unhealthy, and toxic forces beyond our control. All this is the consequence of the Fall. It’s the primary symptom of original sin. It’s the root of why there are such vast disparities in our world when it comes to access, opportunity, resources, etc. We naturally do not sacrifice for each other. We naturally do not serve each other. We naturally are not generous towards one another. Yes, we might be able to do these things for a season - if enough cultural pressure is brought to bear - but, by and large, on a day to day basis, we are not wired for selflessness and this is tragic. It’s why the history of the human race is filled with so much horror and pain and suffering and violence and evil. We are not good. Not by any definition. Not by any stretch of the imagination.

Jesus came to wage war on the tyranny of self. He came to overthrow the kingdom of self. He came to set us free from slavery to self. I love how the Apostle Peter describes it in our reading from today, “Since Jesus went through everything you’re going through and more, learn to think like him. Think of your sufferings as a weaning from that old sinful habit of always expecting to get your own way. Then you’ll be able to live out your days free to pursue what God wants instead of being tyrannized by what you want.” (1 Peter 4:1-2 MSG) The reality is we are all “tyrannized” by our selfish desires. We are all enslaved to our insatiable appetites. No matter how much we achieve or how much we gain or how much we experience or how much we accumulate...it is never enough. The dopamine rush eventually wears off, leaving us craving more and more and more. The more we seek to feed our selfish desires, the more depressed we become. The more seek to serve our “selves” primarily, the more impoverished and broken our relationships become. The data on this is overwhelming and unequivocal. What else can explain the sharp rises in rates of anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicidal ideation? What else can explain the accompanying rises in drug use whether it’s recreational marijuana, opioids, and other narcotics? What else can explain the dramatic rise in the need for therapists and psychologists? We are all seeking to address an existential hole in our hearts but we keep going about it in all the wrong ways. The answer is not to focus on self but on others. The answer is not selfishness but selflessness. The answer is not to be served but to serve. And if that last bit sounds familiar it’s because it’s exactly the antidote Jesus provides.

Jesus knows the tyranny of self. He has suffered under its yoke. He's knows how challenging this world can be and how tempting it is to turn inward. Jesus faced all these temptations and more when He walked the earth. Thankfully, He never succumbed to their pressure. He refused to bow the knee to Self. He refused to use His limitless resources and abilities to serve Self. Instead, He gave Himself away and He calls us to do the same. If you want to live a life filled with joy and peace and grace and beauty and love, there is only way to do it. Follow Jesus. Learn to think like Him. Learn to act like Him. As you do, you will be set free to live as God created you to live and be the person He created you to be.

Readings for tomorrow: Hebrews 1-4

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**December 19, 2023**  
**Jesus is the Centerpiece**

Readings for today: [Hebrews 1-4](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

Hebrews is a great book to read the week leading up to Christmas because of how it focuses our attention on Christ. The author has a clear view of Jesus. He knows Jesus is greater than the angels. Greater than the prophets of old. Greater than even Moses who came before Him. There is none like Christ. None whom the Father claims as His Son. None who was given all authority in heaven and on earth. None who even now sits on the throne. Only Jesus. He cannot be dismissed. He cannot be ignored. He cannot be denied. He cannot be commercialized or trivialized. His birth is the greatest miracle the world has ever known. His life is the greatest testimony the world has ever seen. His death is the greatest sacrifice ever made. His resurrection is the greatest victory ever won. And all of this is what we celebrate on Christmas.

I've been preaching Christmas Eve services for over twenty years now and the story never gets old. It's incredibly humbling to get to share the good news of great joy each and every year. I still cannot believe I get to do what I do. I stand in a long line of heralds who came before me. Men and women like Paul and Priscilla. Apollos and Junia. The unnamed author of Hebrews and the disciple whom Jesus loved. Not to mention the thousands upon thousands of pastors and missionaries and theologians throughout history who dedicated their lives to this same proclamation. The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. The Son of God took on human form and entered the world. The Spirit of God hovered over the virgin womb of Mary and conceived the God-Man. The Son of the Most High became one of us in order to give His life for us. This is why the writer of Hebrews talks about Jesus as the great high priest who suffers like we suffer. Endures the same temptations we endure. Lived as we live. In this way, He can identify with us in our weaknesses and present them before the Father. This is why He came. It's incredible. There are no words.

As you hustle about these final days before Christmas, here's my prayer for you... "So, my dear Christian friends, companions in following this call to the heights, take a good hard look at Jesus. He's the centerpiece of everything we believe, faithful in everything God gave him to do." (Hebrews 3:1-2 MSG) Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus. Spend time with Him every single day. Let His Word dwell in you richly. Let His love fill your soul with joy. Let His passion to reach the lost compel you to share Christ with those around you and invite them to join you on Christmas Eve. Most of all, let the miracle of His birth fill you with awe and wonder yet again as you approach the manger.

Readings for tomorrow: Hebrews 5-8

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**December 20, 2023**  
**The Truest Story**

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

The gospel is the best story because it is a true story. Anchored on the promise of God. Sealed by the oath of God. Grounded on the fact that God cannot lie nor change His mind. Throughout human history, God has made many promises. He promised Noah deliverance. He promised Abraham a child. He promised Moses victory. He promised David a descendant to sit on his throne. In each case, He swears an oath by Himself. He puts His glory and His honor on the line. And in every case He delivers. He fulfills His promise. Even in the face of our doubts and fears, disobedience and sin, God never wavers. He is faithful.

This is why the author of Hebrews says “We who have run for our very lives to God have every reason to grab the promised hope with both hands and never let go. It’s an unbreakable spiritual lifeline, reaching past all appearances right to the very presence of God where Jesus, running on ahead of us, has taken up his permanent post as high priest for us, in the order of Melchizedek.” (Hebrews 6:18b-20 MSG) He knows God can be trusted. He knows God has made a promise. The promise of a Savior. The promise of a Messiah. The promise of a King to sit on His throne and a High Priest to intercede in the heavens. God not only made this promise but He swore an oath. He put His glory and honor on the line. He will not let it fail. So by these two “unchangeable things” - the oath and character of God - we have assurance. We have hope. We can hold fast to what God has set before us.

The story of Jesus is no fairy tale. It is no myth or legend. It is not fiction or something any human being made up. Jesus was born. Jesus lived. Jesus suffered. Jesus died. Jesus rose again. These are historical events. You can actually go and see where they took place. You can visit Bethlehem where Jesus was born. You can walk around Galilee and see where Jesus ministered for three years. You can go to Golgotha and see where Jesus was crucified. You can touch the slab where His body lay. Not only that but you can read about these events not only in the Bible but in extra-biblical sources as well. No one disputes that they actually happened. This is what makes the gospel so compelling after all these years. It’s true! It’s real! It happened! And that’s why we celebrate at Christmas!

Readings for tomorrow: Hebrews 9-13

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**December 21, 2023**  
**The Life of Faith**

Readings for today: [Hebrews 9-13](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

I love this section of Hebrews because of how it helps us come face to face with the life of faith. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not yet seen. Walking by faith and not by sight is the key to a vibrant relationship with Christ. It places us in a posture of trust. It pushes us to open our hands and hearts to all kinds of God-ordained possibilities. What no eye has seen and no ear heard. What no human heart can understand. This is the life God offers us if we will let go of our need for control and certainty. God wants to do more than we can ever ask or imagine. God wants to give us every spiritual blessing from heaven. God wants to give good gifts to His children. These are His promises and they are sure. But we can only receive them as we let go of the things of this world. Let go of our plans for our lives. Let go of our need to manage and control outcomes.

A friend of mine likens the Christian life to that of a leaky boat. All of us have holes. All of us are taking on water to a certain extent. We were born this way. It's the result of original sin as well as our own selfish, sinful choices in life. After we come to saving faith in Jesus Christ, we have a decision to make. We can spend all our time bailing water. Grabbing a bucket and trying to stay afloat in our own strength and by our own effort. Eventually, however, we'll tire out and we'll begin to sink. The other alternative is to push the throttle all the way down. Commit ourselves wholeheartedly to Christ. Place ourselves under His power and His authority and watch all the water we've taken on flow out the back. This is what I think the author of Hebrews is talking about when he writes, "Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!" (Hebrews 12:2-3 MSG)

The more we place our lives in God's hands, the more we will find ourselves tapping into supernatural resources of wisdom and strength. The more we trust God for our lives, the more we will be sustained by the manna which comes from heaven. The more we press into Christ, the more we will find ourselves disentangled from sin and released from the heavy burdens we carry. This doesn't mean the life of faith is easy. Go back and read the stories listed in the 11th chapter and you'll see a whole lot of struggle and suffering. However, what you'll also see is victory. The people of God overcoming the trials and tribulations of this world because they kept their eyes focused on a higher prize. This is ultimately what fuels the life of faith. Keeping our eyes on Christ. Rehearsing in our heads and hearts all He went through on our behalf. This is what shoots adrenaline into our souls!

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Timothy 1-4

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**December 22, 2023**  
**Sticking with Jesus**

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

All of us stake our life on something. All of us hold to a particular worldview. All of us live by a particular code of ethics. Unexamined or not, every decision we make and every action we take is rational within the particular framework through which we view life. Many people confuse rationality with objectivity but this is a mistake. It's not possible for human beings to be "objective" because it is impossible for us to stand outside our own life experiences and cultural context. Just as a fish doesn't recognize the water it's swimming in, we are unable to see or fully grasp all of the forces that influence how we think, feel, or act in a given moment.

What we believe informs what we decide. What we decide informs how we feel. And our decisions and feelings don't just impact our lives but the lives of those around us as well. For those who hold a certain level of authority and/or power within a family or organization or particular sphere like politics, beliefs can have a significant ripple effect for good or evil. Think about a group like Hamas. Because they do not believe in the value of human life, they use innocents as human shields, divert resources that otherwise would go to better the lives of Palestinians into a terror infrastructure, and they use rape and torture and kidnapping to hold the world hostage. These decisions are rational within their perverted framework even though most of the rest of the world condemns their actions.

The Apostle Paul is operating out of a particular framework as well. And before he dies, he wants to pass it on to his protege, Timothy. "Fix this picture firmly in your mind: Jesus, descended from the line of David, raised from the dead. It's what you've heard from me all along. It's what I'm sitting in jail for right now...so that everyone God calls will get in on the salvation of Christ in all its glory. This is a sure thing: If we die with him, we'll live with him; If we stick it out with him, we'll rule with him; If we turn our backs on him, he'll turn his back on us; If we give up on him, he does not give up—for there's no way he can be false to himself." (2 Timothy 2:8-13 MSG) He knows Timothy will face persecution. He knows Timothy will be attacked by those inside as well outside the church. He knows Timothy will face hardship and suffering. The only way Timothy will persevere is if he keeps his mind and heart set on Christ. If Timothy sticks with Jesus, it will be worth it in the end.

What about you? What do you believe? What worldview do you hold to? What framework do you use when making your decisions? What have you staked your life on? Are you sticking with Jesus or have you placed your trust in something or someone else?

Readings for tomorrow: 2 Peter 1-3, Jude

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**December 23, 2023**  
**Building for Glory**

Readings for today: [2 Peter 1-3, Jude](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

All of us want to know where life is headed. Is it headed for glory or for ruin? Will my life make a difference or will my life be wasted? Is my life worth anything in the grand scheme of things or is my life vain and worthless? Will I be remembered or will I simply be another name on a headstone somewhere? Will I leave a legacy or will my accomplishments turn to dust after I'm gone? Just about everyone I know has asked these questions at some point in time in their lives. I have sat at the bedside of countless people as they transitioned from this life into the next and these are the kinds of things they want to know. They aren't interested in the size of their 401k. They don't look back with longing at their careers. They don't ask for more stuff. They want to know if their life counted.

The Apostle Peter clearly shows us how to live a life that counts for something. He gives us the roadmap for a life well lived. Listen to what he says again, "Don't lose a minute in building on what you've been given, complementing your basic faith with good character, spiritual understanding, alert discipline, passionate patience, reverent wonder, warm friendliness, and generous love, each dimension fitting into and developing the others. With these qualities active and growing in your lives, no grass will grow under your feet, no day will pass without its reward as you mature in your experience of our Master Jesus. Without these qualities you can't see what's right before you, oblivious that your old sinful life has been wiped off the books." (2 Peter 1:5-9 MSG) Peter understands the gift we've been given in Jesus Christ. He sees the invitation God has extended to us to live a life pleasing to Him. He knows that if we will be diligent and intentional about building our lives on the rock that is Christ, not a minute will be wasted. Not a second will be lost. Each and every day will bring with it an eternal reward. People often wonder why people like Peter or Paul or the many other women and men throughout history who were martyred for their faith could face death with such confidence. It's because they were building for eternity. They understood their life's horizon existed beyond the boundaries of this world. They knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that ever moment they spent developing their godly character and spiritual understanding was preparing them for the indestructible life to come.

What about you? Do you live with such assurance? Do you know your life is counting for something? Do you have confidence that when you appear before the throne of judgment that you will hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant?" If not, I plead with you to follow Peter's prescription above. Cast aside your sinful ways and turn to Christ with all your heart. Surrender to Him. Offer your life back to Him. Give Him all that you are and all that you have and trust Him to do even greater things for you than you can possibly ask or imagine!

Readings for tomorrow: None

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**December 25, 2023**  
**True Happiness**

Readings for today, [1 John](#), [2 John](#), [3 John](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

I recently had a friend tell me they weren't sure they'd ever find true happiness. It's heartbreaking because this is someone who seemingly has it all. They have a loving spouse. Great kids. They live in an affluent community that is safe and well-established. They have lots of good friends. What are they missing? They are missing Jesus. My friend abandoned the faith years ago due to significant frustration and disappointment with some fellow Christians. It was so sad to watch. We dialogued several times as I tried to help my friend process their pain but sadly, I wasn't able to help heal the wounds they had suffered at the hands of fellow believers. I know my friend's journey isn't over and I believe with all my heart that God is faithful but my friend seems very far from God at this point and I can only pray for the Holy Spirit to draw them back to faith.

This is why the Apostle John is so serious about love. His letters are full of love. He defines love. Encourages love. Challenges his fellow believers to live lives overflowing with love. Love for God. Love for each other. Love for the lost. John knows love is the antidote to fear and anxiety. Love is the healing balm for all our pain and suffering. Love is firm foundation for all relationships. Love is the answer to all our deepest questions. And just to be clear, John isn't talking about a feeling when he talks about love. He's talking about an action. He's talking about God sending His only Son into the world to lay His life down as a sacrifice for our sins. That's true love. And true love is what leads to true life. And true life is what leads to true happiness. To reject God's love is to reject life. To reject God's life is to reject happiness and joy and peace for these things are the byproduct of the experience of God's love.

Listen to how John describes it again, "My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other since love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God. The person who refuses to love doesn't know the first thing about God, because God is love—so you can't know him if you don't love. This is how God showed his love for us: God sent his only Son into the world so we might live through him. This is the kind of love we are talking about—not that we once upon a time loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to clear away our sins and the damage they've done to our relationship with God." (1 John 4:7-10 MSG) Do you see how differently John defines love? The world defines love as an attraction. A fleeting emotion. Something you can fall in or out of randomly or even quickly. John defines love as an eternal sacrifice. An unbreakable and unshakable commitment. One worth dying for. Is this how you understand love?

Readings for tomorrow: Revelation 1-5

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December 26, 2023  
**Alpha and Omega**

Readings for today: [Revelation 1-5](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

It's the day after Christmas. The day after we celebrate the first Advent of Christ's coming. The day we begin to turn our thoughts to the new year and what's to come. Many will make resolutions in the coming days. They will set goals for 2024. They will reflect on their physical health, mental and emotional health, relationships, professional goals, etc. What about your spiritual life? Do any of your goals for the new year include growing in your relationship with God?

It's an important question because the Advent of Jesus Christ is not a "one and done" affair. He is coming again. He is coming with all the power and authority in heaven and on earth in His hands. He is coming to judge the living and the dead. He is bringing the new heavens and the new earth with Him. He is coming to establish His reign and rule in glory once and for all.

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

So let me begin this home stretch with one of my favorite verses..."I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty." (Revelation 1:8) Or, as the Message version puts it, "I'm A to Z. I'm The God Who Is, The God Who Was, and The God About to Arrive. I'm the Sovereign-Strong." God spoke the first Word in creation and God will have the last Word in consummation. He who began all things, will bring them to a close according to His will and good pleasure. God is. This is all we know. This is all we can really say. God stands outside the time and space continuum He created and will remain there looking in until He determines the time is right for His return. As John wrote in His Gospel, God revealed Himself to the world but the world did not recognize Him. He revealed Himself to His people, His family, and they rejected Him. But when He comes again, every knee will bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord. He will leave no doubt. "Riding the clouds, he'll be seen by every eye, those who mocked and killed him will see him, People from all nations and all times will tear their clothes in lament. Oh, Yes." (Revelation 1:7 MSG)

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

Readings for tomorrow: Revelation 6-10

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December 27, 2023

When?

Readings for today: [Revelation 6-10](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

I often meet Christians who believe the Lord is coming back in their lifetime. They look at the world around us and see the evidence of the four horsemen of the apocalypse. The white horse gallops through places like Ukraine where Russia seeks to conquer her former republic. The red horse rides through places like Gaza and Somalia and South Sudan and Yemen where terrorist groups disrupt peace with violence. The black horse visits nations afflicted by famine due to natural disasters, locust plagues, climate change, and other calamities. And the pale horse eventually comes for us all, bringing not only famine but disease with him. Of course, these four horses don't just ride in other parts of the globe. They are very present here at home as well. The conflict between political parties and extremist groups is real. The violence in cities like Chicago or on the southern border cannot be ignored. The plight of those living in food deserts in communities all over our country or those who struggle to find sustainable housing is heartbreaking. And the death of those we love due to tragedy, diseases like cancer, or some other event that robs those we love of life is more common than we want to admit.

This is why we cry out with the saints who have gone before us, "How long, Strong God, Holy and True, how long before you step in?" (Rev. 6:10 MSG) I imagine Christians throughout history and around the globe today join us in that same cry. Can you imagine, for example, what it must have felt like to live in Europe during the Black Plague when 1/3 of the population died? Imagine living in the Holy Land when the Crusaders arrived or in Spain under the Inquisition? Imagine what it must have felt like to live under Stalin's purges or the regimes of Pol Pot or Mao Zedong where millions lost their lives? Imagine what it must have felt like to live in the death camps in Nazi Germany or to be Tutsi in Rwanda during the genocide? I don't share these examples to diminish the very real pain and suffering so many of us face on a daily basis but simply to help us gain some perspective on the delay of the parousia or the Lord's return.

God has a plan. He is never early. He is never late. He arrives precisely on time. He sees all the evil that is taking place on the earth and He will one day come to judge the living and the dead. No crime will go unpunished. No wrong will fail to be made right. No injustice will be allowed to stand. No sin will go unaddressed. Those who bear His seal will be saved and will represent a multitude from every tribe, tongue, and nation on the earth. But until that day comes, life on earth will not be easy. We will experience trial and tribulation. But we can take heart for if we persevere in faith, we will receive a white robe, washed in the blood of Jesus Himself. We will find ourselves standing before the throne of God, serving Him day and night. We will hunger no more neither will we thirst. God will wipe away every tear and take away every sadness and make all things new. Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus! Come quickly!

Readings for tomorrow: Revelation 11-13

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**December 28, 2023**  
**Judgment**

Readings for today: [Revelation 11-13](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

I find most people live with a sense of cognitive dissonance. On the one hand, everyone generally agrees that our world is not in great shape. There is too much violence. Too much pain and suffering. Too much disease. Too much inequality. Too much resource disparity. Too much anger. Too much hate. We generally blame God for not stepping in. Not taking care of things. Not leveling the playing field. Not solving our problems. Not restraining evil. At the same time, everyone generally agrees they want to be free. Free to make their own decisions. Free to live their lives the way they want. Free to pursue the fulfillment of their desires. We don't want God to tell us what to do. Don't want God to challenge our choices. Don't want God to restrict our behavior. But we can't have it both ways. The fundamental reality that the Bible affirms is that we are free, moral agents, created in the image of God, capable of great good and great evil, fully responsible for the decisions we make and the impact those choices have on others and this is why we are subject to God's judgment.

God loves the world. He loves everything He has made. He loves every creature He has made. He loves every human being He has made. And that's why God hates what we've done to the world. He hates what we do to each other. He hates what we do to ourselves. And He holds us responsible for each and every action and non-action. He holds us responsible for each and every word we say or don't say. He holds us responsible for the way we respond to those around us and especially the way we respond to Him. He created us. He created us to worship and to serve Him forever. And when we reject His creative purposes for our lives, we live for ourselves and living for ourselves is what ultimately leads us to ruin. God, however, will not abandon us. He will not abandon the world He has made. He is coming again to judge the earth and everyone in it. He is coming again to make all things new and take control of His world once and for all. Listen again to how the Apostle John describes it, "The kingdom of the world is now the Kingdom of our God and his Messiah! He will rule forever and ever! The Twenty-four Elders seated before God on their thrones fell to their knees, worshiped, and sang, We thank you, O God, Sovereign-Strong, Who Is and Who Was. You took your great power and took over—reigned! The angry nations now get a taste of your anger. The time has come to judge the dead, to reward your servants, all prophets and saints, Reward small and great who fear your Name, and destroy the destroyers of earth." (Revelation 11:15-18 MSG)

Thanks be to God that we know the end of the story! Now the challenge is for us to live with God's glorious end in mind. Live now as if the kingdoms of this world have already become the Kingdom of our God and His Messiah. Live in the reality of God's reign and rule on earth. This is the call to the church. This is the call to every Christian.

Readings for tomorrow: Revelation 14-18

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December 29, 2023

### The Call

Readings for today; [Revelation 14-18](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

Amidst all the fantastic visions and angelic pronouncements about the end times, there is this call to the saints of God. “Meanwhile, the saints stand passionately patient, keeping God’s commands, staying faithful to Jesus.” (Revelation 14:12 MSG) It’s so tempting when we read a book like Revelation to spend all our time trying to decipher what John was attempting to say. We do our best to cross the cultural divide. Analyze the apocalyptic text. Search for clues to help us discern whether these ancient prophecies are coming true in our own time. We spend all kinds of time, attention, and energy debating the finer points of each vision as we look for the day when Christ will appear and all things will be made new. All the while, Jesus is calling us to “stand passionately patient, keeping God’s commands, staying faithful to Jesus.”

This is the fundamental call for every Christian in every time and place. Yes, we can spend our time debating end times theology. Yes, we can spend our time wrestling over the timing of the eschaton. Yes, we can argue pre-millennial, post-millennial, and amillennial points of view. But at the end of the day, the challenge remains the same for each one of us. Are we living lives of faithfulness to Jesus? Are we seeking to follow His commands? Are we remaining passionately patient? Fervently praying for His return? No matter the cost? Life has its ups and downs. So does history. There are periods of persecution followed by periods of peace. There are seasons where following Christ is affirmed and seasons where following Christ is challenging. There are places in the world today where it is safe to be a Christian and places where it is unsafe. Often, our perspective on the end times will be shaped by our experiences in this world, good or bad. Through it all, the call remains the same. Remain patient. Keep God’s commands. Stay faithful to Jesus.

We are coming to the end of our journey through the Bible this year. What does 2024 look like for you? What’s your plan to grow spiritually? To dive deeper in your faith? What goals have you set for yourself? What goals has the Holy Spirit set for you? What will it look like for you to remain passionately patient as you await Christ’s return? Where do you need to align your life with the commandments of God? What areas of your life do you need to submit to Christ? What does it mean for you to remain faithful to Jesus? How is such faithfulness reflected in the way you spend your time? Where you put your attention? How you spend your money? These are great questions to reflect on as you think about 2024 and beyond.

Readings for tomorrow: Revelation 19-22

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December 30, 2023

[The End?](#)

Readings for today: [Revelation 19-22](#)      [\(audio reading\)](#)

“Come, Lord Jesus!” Echoing Paul’s famous phrase from 1 Corinthians 16:22 - “Maranatha” - John finishes the Revelation with what has become the heart cry of Christians for centuries. Come, Lord Jesus. Come soon. The vision John has received has reached its climax. The new heavens and new earth have come. New Jerusalem has descended out of heaven. God in the midst of her. The gates are open continually for the nations of the earth to receive their blessing. The leaves of the trees that grow beside the river of God are for their healing. God has wiped away every tear. God has done away with every evil. There is no more crying or suffering or pain. God has made good on His promise. The Alpha has issued the final “Omega.” What was once broken is now whole. What was ruined has now been restored. The incomplete has been brought to completion. It is truly finished. All things made new.

The delay of the “parousia” or 2nd coming of Jesus has plagued Christians for centuries. Why does Jesus not return? What is He waiting for? Many Christians have believed He was coming back in their lifetimes. As they looked around at the evil and suffering in their world, they could not imagine things getting worse. Many believed they were seeing the four horsemen of Revelation storming all over the earth bringing war, disease, famine, and death. Such has been the lot of humanity since Cain first slew Abel all those years ago. The Apostles were no different. John, Paul, Peter, along with most of the Christians of the first century, believed Jesus was returning in their lifetimes. It colors some of their advice to the local churches they were writing to. Scholars suggest you can even see Paul grappling with this delay, especially in his correspondence with the Corinthians and Thessalonians.

Why hasn’t Jesus returned? Our atheist friends suggest it’s because God doesn’t exist. The “Father” Jesus so faithfully believed in is a myth. Jesus, as good as He was, made a mistake. Others suggest it’s because the work of the church isn’t finished. The Great Commission has yet to come to completion. We haven’t preached the gospel to every tribe, tongue, and nation so everyone hasn’t yet had a chance to hear the good news. Still others believe it’s because the events of Revelation haven’t yet come to pass. The anti-Christ has yet to be revealed and as bad as things may be, they will get much, much worse before the end. To be honest, I have no idea why Jesus hasn’t returned and can only assume it’s because His plans for this world have yet to reach their fulfillment. Time doesn’t pass for God like it does for us. While we are stuck in “chronological” time. Time as it ticks by. God exists in “Kairos” time. Time outside of time. Special time. Anointed time. The appropriate time. And only God knows where we stand according to His eternal clock. What we can know is that Jesus promised He would come.

And what should our response be? To come to Jesus. “Come!” say the Spirit and the Bride. Whoever hears, echo, “Come!” Is anyone thirsty? Come! All who will, come and drink, Drink freely of the Water of Life!” (Revelation 22:17 MSG) Don’t miss this! The movement goes both ways. God comes to us, we come to Him. God returns to us, we return to Him. God draws near to us, we draw near to Him. This is the pattern God has set since the first chapters of Genesis and it repeats itself here at the end of Revelation. This is God’s great desire. It is the primary message He’s been preaching through the entire Bible. It is the Word He longs for us to hear and receive and respond to by faith. So trust Him, friends! Accept His invitation! Believe in His name and receive the salvation He offers you by grace!

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