

OUR STORY

GOD'S WORK. OUR HOPE.

Chronological Readings

December



NORTH FORT WORTH
BAPTIST CHURCH

PRACTICAL APPROACH TO OUR DAILY READINGS

Commit to a consistent time and place (allow 15-20 minutes).

Read each day's passage prayerfully. Don't ask the question, "What does today's reading mean to me?" Read each day, asking, "What truth is God revealing?" Focus especially upon:

What does the reading reveal about God?

What does the reading reveal about humanity (about me)?

What does the reading reveal about what is "relationally" appropriate or inappropriate toward God? God isn't supplying us with a list of rules to follow.

He's inviting us to relate to Him as God so we might walk with Him by faith.

What does the reading reveal about God's unfolding work of salvation?

Underline what stands out. We want to remember key ideas or verses.

Prayerfully identify one promise, insight, or action to carry with you into the day, and then commit it to the Lord in prayer.

Read each day's devotion for further perspective.

Keep in mind—the goal is NOT to read the Bible thru. The DAILY COMMITMENT is to draw near to God by faith and to experience the life-changing power of Jesus Christ.

ENLIST A PERSON OR GROUP TO JOIN YOUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Agree to hold one another accountable.

Touch base consistently about your readings.

Exchange daily texts, emails, or social media posts to highlight the promise, insight, or action you seek to carry into the day.

Talk weekly or every other week by phone or in person. Discuss specific lessons or questions that especially stand out.

Adopt an approach that works best for you—consistency is the key.

Pray for one another by name for spiritual understanding and growth.

Encourage one another to press through the ups and downs of the journey.

December 1

2 Corinthians 11:1-13:14; Acts 20:7-12

Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm. Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of my concern for all the churches . . . (2 Corinthians 11:24–28)

In today's reading, Paul defends his credibility among the Corinthians. A group of so-called “super-apostles” has undermined his leadership, causing some within the congregation to question Paul's legitimacy. It must have been heartbreaking for God's apostle. Paul had given so much of himself on the Corinthians' behalf. And now, he is forced to prove his worth to an ungrateful congregation. Of course, his resume' would withstand anyone's scrutiny. Paul has been a faithful servant despite considerable hardship.

Consider the challenges Paul listed above. Can you imagine experiencing just two or three of the hardships? Five times—he was cruelly whipped; three times—beaten with rods; and one time—stoned and left for dead. Do you think you might be tempted to give up? Yet, Paul is just getting started. He's tested physically and emotionally, but God's servant presses on. He refuses to allow his circumstances to stand in the way of God's call upon his life. Can we say the same?

And what about his spiritual experiences in comparison with the “super-apostles”? Again, Paul's testimony sets him apart. He speaks of being mysteriously carried into what he calls the third heaven. And there, he's informed of things that are so astounding that it is impossible to express. Indeed, the revelation is so profound that it includes a subsequent hardship to keep God's servant humble before the Lord. Paul refers to the difficulty as a “*thorn in the flesh*.” Three times, he begs the Lord to take it away. He pleads with God, seeking relief.

And the result? Instead of removing the problem, the Lord speaks directly to Paul and says, “*My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.*” (2 Corinthians 12:9) God asks Paul to trust Him, to rely on His sustaining grace. Does God's servant take the lesson to heart? He does. Paul confesses, “*So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*” (2 Corinthians 12:9–10)

Can we express the same? It's natural and appropriate for Paul to ask the Lord to remove the hardship. Yet, God helps his servant to grow through the experience instead. Consider again the Lord's reassuring words, “*My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.*” (2 Corinthians 12:9)

Will we accept this as true? Can we, like Paul, boast about our weaknesses and learn to rely on Jesus' sufficiency? Here, God's servant is trying to defend himself in the eyes of a temperamental congregation, and Paul shares a spiritual lesson that has strengthened God's people for generations. I pray we take the lesson to heart. Whatever our situation, may we renew our faith and trust in Jesus' sufficiency. His grace is all we need. May God's sustaining power be renewed within. Amen?

December 2

Acts 20:13-21:36

And now I am bound by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem. I don't know what awaits me, except that the Holy Spirit tells me in city after city that jail and suffering lie ahead. (Acts 20:22–23)

Paul is on his way back to Jerusalem. So much has happened since Saul (better known as Paul) set out for Damascus from Jerusalem. Over twenty years earlier, the zealous Pharisee had been a persecutor of the Church. Saul/Paul did all he could to silence the message of Jesus, but then he encountered the unexpected. Saul/Paul meets the resurrected Jesus, and his life is never the same.

Paul is now returning to Jerusalem two decades later. However, this time, it's his life that will be threatened. God reveals this future outcome as Paul journeys to where his story in the book of Acts began—Jerusalem (Acts 7:58). The question is, “How will Paul respond?” There should be little doubt. Indeed, Paul asserts, *“But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.”* (Acts 20:24) He is determined to complete the work before him.

Some, however, would encourage Paul to turn back. The prophet Agabus dramatically appeals to Paul. *“He came over, took Paul's belt, and bound his own feet and hands with it. Then he said, ‘The Holy Spirit declares, So shall the owner of this belt be bound by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and turned over to the Gentiles.’”* (Acts 21:11)

The problem is that some misinterpret the Holy Spirit's revelation. They presume God is warning Paul not to go to Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit, instead, is preparing Paul for what he will soon encounter. God is helping His servant to anticipate the challenges ahead. And Paul's response? He exclaims, *“Why all this weeping? You are breaking my heart! I am ready not only to be jailed at Jerusalem but even to die for the sake of the Lord Jesus.”* (Acts 21:13) Of course, the Holy Spirit's message will prove accurate. Paul is arrested in Jerusalem, and a new journey begins for God's missionary to the Gentiles.

And our lesson? Don't presume that following Jesus will lead a person away from hardship. We've dealt with this frequently during our chronological readings. Our desire to avoid difficulty is human nature. But what if some of God's purposes require us to step toward a difficult situation? What if participating in God's greater work includes suffering?

I'm not suggesting that we look to harm ourselves unnecessarily. But what if God calls us to endure a challenge for Jesus' sake—even to suffer? Paul models a faith that should instruct and inspire. Instead of complaining about or trying to avoid some of life's difficulties, is the Lord calling us toward His greater work?

I pray God grants us the faith and courage, like Paul, to step toward our Jerusalems—whatever they may be. And you?

December 3

Acts 21:37–23:35

That night the Lord appeared to Paul and said, “Be encouraged, Paul. Just as you have been a witness to me here in Jerusalem, you must preach the Good News in Rome as well.” (Acts 23:11)

God prepared Paul for the events in Jerusalem. He warned His servant of what would be. The Lord revealed that the apostle would be arrested and suffer. And, as our readings in Acts indicate, God's revelation proves true. Paul is apprehended by an angry mob in the Temple who seek his harm. Indeed, some attempt to kill God's servant (Acts 21:31). At that point, a Roman regiment intervenes. It is quite the scene and puts into motion a series of events that results in Paul being taken to Caesarea for his safety and well-being.

What do we learn from today's reading? First, note the Lord's reassuring words to Paul. As highlighted above, God reminds Paul that He is ultimately in charge despite the turmoil. He informs His servant of His larger plan that Paul will preach in Rome. The further revelation on God's part would become a stabilizing force for Paul as he experiences extended confinement in Caesarea. Similarly, God has made promises concerning our lives that should likewise strengthen and encourage our hearts. Do we allow them? Where is our focus?

Second, notice Paul's boldness (even before God's reassuring message). We should admire his courage in the face of such hostility. Instead of retreating with the Roman regiment, Paul requests an opportunity to address the crowd. What does he hope to share? Paul seizes the moment to point others to the truth of Jesus Christ. I'm humbled by his determination and instructed by his example.

Paul doesn't deliver a sermon. He tells a story—his story. The apostle recounts how the resurrected Jesus impacted his life. There's a lesson in that. Every believer has a story to tell. Perhaps it is not as dramatic as Paul's, but if it points another to the truth of Jesus, God's Spirit will always be engaged. God will work to illuminate a darkened heart, to open a person's spiritual eyes. Whenever we share what we know concerning Jesus, the opportunity is there for God's activity. And when we don't? Let's learn from Paul's example.

Finally, consider how God works through the existing structures to accomplish His purpose and plan. The Lord uses a Roman regiment to protect His servant, enabling him to share his faith. Sometimes, God utilizes current laws and systems to accomplish His plan. Don't lose sight of that. Even Paul uses his Roman citizenship to his advantage and protection. We should learn to do the same. Instead of viewing the world's structures and systems as adversarial to God's activity, maybe we should open our eyes to God's capacity to work through such powers. In a nation that guarantees freedom of speech and religion, we should speak out about Jesus. We should freely assert our rights in the cause of Christ rather than be intimidated by an angry mob. Let's allow the structures and systems to work on our behalf when appropriate.

A new chapter in Paul's life is beginning. I pray God will continue to encourage and strengthen our hearts through his example. May we display his boldness and faith. May God's work of grace be evident in our lives, particularly today!

December 4
Acts 24:1-26:32

After two years went by in this way, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus. And because Felix wanted to gain favor with the Jewish people, he left Paul in prison. (Acts 24:27)

How patient are we with God's plan for our lives? Do we set deadlines that we determine are best? Do we dictate to God instead of trusting in His timing? As is often the case, Paul challenges us with his example.

God promised that He would take care of His servant and that Paul would even have the opportunity to preach in Rome. Two years later, Paul is still confined in Caesarea. That's right. The apostle to the Gentiles has been in custody long enough to experience a change in Roman leadership from Felix to Festus. Granted, he's been protected from those who would do him harm—but Paul has been confined for over two years.

Do you think Paul is becoming frustrated with God's plan? There's no such indication. Instead, Paul appears focused on the opportunities he's afforded. He even shares his faith with the Roman governor. Felix, however, is more interested in receiving a bribe than in understanding the message of Jesus. Still, Paul remains faithful to sharing the truth as opportunities allow. Can we say the same?

After Festus is appointed governor, Paul's accusers again make their case against the apostle and level allegations they cannot prove. To avoid being transferred back to Jerusalem, Paul appeals his case to Caesar. This is interesting when considering God's earlier promise that Paul would preach in Rome. As I noted yesterday, this again illustrates how God often works through the structures and systems in place to fulfill His larger plan. God does so here. And now, two years later, Paul's journey to Rome may finally get underway.

Once again, I ask, "How patient are we with God's timing?" Paul proves to be extraordinarily patient. While he waits, he continues to look for opportunities to share his hope in Christ. His patience allows Paul to present the gospel to royalty, King Agrippa, and his wife, Bernice. We never know what God can do when we trust His timing and plan.

So, one final time, I ask, "Are we patient with God's plan?" Should we be? I pray today's reading reminds us that God is still working when the circumstances seem contrary to what we expect. And, perhaps, like Paul, we can seize opportunities around us to share our faith in ways that might also influence another.

May it be so!

December 5 Acts 27:1-44

When the time came, we set sail for Italy. Paul and several other prisoners were placed in the custody of a Roman officer named Julius, a captain of the Imperial Regiment. (Acts 27:1)

Paul's voyage to Rome is officially underway. He's waited two years for God's promise to be fulfilled. The Lord informed His servant that he would ultimately preach in Rome. Though the events leading to his departure likely differed from what Paul expected, his journey finally began. And what can we learn?

First, let's appreciate the courage and loyalty of Paul's associate, Luke. Though he does not call attention to himself by name, the "we" reference in verse 1 is worth noting. *"When the time came, we set sail for Italy."* In other words, the detailed information in today's reading is an eyewitness account by Luke himself. Do not take his effort for granted. God uses Luke (a historian and physician) to provide a testimony concerning Jesus and His Church that has impacted the world for almost 2000 years. Luke's testimony, however, did not come without testing or difficulty. He faces the same harsh conditions that Paul and the others endure. Again, let's appreciate Luke's courage and loyalty. He's there with Paul despite the personal hardship.

Second, observe Paul's confidence throughout their perilous passage. What is the source? His confidence is based upon God's earlier promise. *"Be encouraged, Paul. Just as you have been a witness to Me here in Jerusalem, you must preach the Good News in Rome as well."* (Acts 23:11) Paul takes God at His Word, which means there's no storm too severe to prevent God from keeping His promise. Indeed, during their turbulent journey, God renews His pledge. The Lord extends His sustaining grace to all traveling with the apostle. *"None of you will lose your lives,"* Paul attests, *"even though the ship will go down. For last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood beside me, and he said, 'Don't be afraid, Paul, for you will surely stand trial before Caesar! What's more, God in His goodness has granted safety to everyone sailing with you.' So take courage! For I believe God. It will be just as He said."* (Acts 27:22-25) Paul's faith is well-founded. God demonstrates His faithfulness to His promise.

How does this relate to us? Let's not lose sight of the "Lukes" of this world. They often work behind the scenes, facing personal challenges and tests, yet provide a testimony to Jesus that strengthens our lives. If you know someone like Luke, take a moment and thank them for their faithful service. And, if you are one of God's "Lukes" among us, please recognize your invaluable role. Yes, the spotlight is frequently on the "Pauls" of this world, but their effectiveness often depends on individuals like you. Thank you for who you are and what you do!

And, based on today's reading, let's also take God at His Word. God enabled Paul to encourage everyone on the ship because of His confidence in God's promise. Who can we encourage concerning God's promises? Life can be unexpectedly stormy. Let's renew our trust in the Lord and seek to reassure those nearby. Let's display Paul's boldness as we testify to God's faithfulness and the good news He extends. Agreed?

December 6

Acts 28:1-31; Ephesians 1:1-2:22

As Paul gathered an armful of sticks and was laying them on the fire, a poisonous snake, driven out by the heat, bit him on the hand. The people of the island saw it hanging from his hand and said to each other, "A murderer, no doubt! Though he escaped the sea, justice will not permit him to live." (Acts 28:3-4)

Bad things happen to bad people. Right? If that is our thinking, Paul must be notoriously bad. At least, that is the initial conclusion of the people in Malta. They observe the apostle surviving a shipwreck only to be bitten by a deadly snake. God must have a target on Paul's back. It is the opposite. Despite the hardships, God's favor is being directed his way. Because of the difficulties, God's power and glory are most vividly displayed. Observe what the Lord accomplished. God sustains Paul through a shipwreck and a snakebite and then demonstrates His power to heal others through His faithful servant.

Do we see the relevance of this to our lives? Do we understand that God works for us through our trials and tribulations, not against us? Like Paul in today's reading, I'm not insinuating that we will miraculously heal the sick. I am suggesting, however, that God can work through the most disappointing circumstances. The Lord can introduce beauty amidst the ugliest of situations. As Paul explains to the Roman believers, *"And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them."* (Romans 8:28) The more I think about it. Whenever God accomplishes something meaningful amidst life's struggles, it may be a display of the miraculous. God can produce good in the ugliest of situations.

Yet, Paul's story is not done. As a result of God's activity, the people of Malta generously support Paul and the others as they resume their journey to Rome. God is still working to fulfill His pledge. And upon Paul's arrival? There's no big surprise. Paul promptly proclaims the gospel and the message of God's kingdom. For two years, waiting to appear before Caesar, Paul shared the truth of Jesus Christ with anyone who would listen. It can be said that Paul lives up to his calling (God's missionary to the Gentiles), and God proves faithful to His promise—to all His promises.

How does the story end? That's an interesting consideration. Luke concludes chapter 28 rather matter-of-factly. It is almost as if you expect another chapter to follow. And perhaps that's the point. Acts chapter 29 is still being recorded. Each new generation of Jesus' followers continues to live out His original promise and command. *"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be My witnesses, telling people about Me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* (Acts 1:8)

In a true sense, we are the Acts 29 Church. We are Acts 29 followers of Jesus Christ. As the book of Acts concludes, let's be encouraged by all we have read. Let's commit ourselves anew to carry out Jesus' command in our generation. Think about it. If Luke was to pick up the story today, what would he write about us? About you? Come on. Let's live up to the promise!

December 7 Ephesians 3:1-5:14

Because of Christ and our faith in Him, we can now come boldly and confidently into God's presence. (Ephesians 3:12)

Paul refuses to allow his confinement in Rome to stand in the way of His service to the Lord. He preaches whenever he can to whomever he can. Paul also wrote a series of uplifting letters (Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, and Philemon) during his Roman imprisonment that continue to impact lives today. He is determined to make a difference despite the limitations. Is that our perspective? Should it be?

Paul's letter to the Ephesians is theologically rich and spiritually practical. He opens our eyes to the good news of Jesus and the impact He should make. Paul also illustrates the power of prayer and intercession. As highlighted above, *"Because of Christ and our faith in Him, we can now come boldly and confidently into God's presence."* (Ephesians 3:12) We draw near to the Lord to avail ourselves of His help and support—not only for ourselves but also for those we know. Again, Paul provides a helpful example. Though limited by his imprisonment in Rome, Paul realizes he can touch the world as he prays for the Ephesians and the other churches. His letter to the Ephesians offers two instructive examples of the apostle's intercession. From yesterday's reading, Paul writes,

"Ever since I first heard of your strong faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for God's people everywhere, I have not stopped thanking God for you. I pray for you constantly, asking God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to give you spiritual wisdom and insight so that you might grow in your knowledge of God. I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the confident hope He has given to those He called—His holy people who are His rich and glorious inheritance. I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe Him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated Him in the place of honor at God's right hand in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 1:15–20)

And then, from today's reading,

"I pray that from His glorious, unlimited resources He will empower you with inner strength through His Spirit. Then Christ will make His home in your hearts as you trust in Him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep His love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God. Now all glory to God, who is able, through His mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. Glory to Him in the Church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen." (Ephesians 3:16–21)

What would happen if we began to lift these prayers to the Lord on our behalf? Also, envision the impact we can make as we pray the same prayers for others. Yes, Paul provides an example that we should follow. Will we do so? If so, let the prayers begin.

December 8

Ephesians 5:15-6:24; Colossians 1:1-23

So we have not stopped praying for you since we first heard about you. We ask God to give you complete knowledge of His will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding. Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit. All the while, you will grow as you learn to know God better and better. We also pray that you will be strengthened with all His glorious power so you will have all the endurance and patience you need. May you be filled with joy, always thanking the Father. He has enabled you to share in the inheritance that belongs to His people, who live in the light. (Colossians 1:9-12)

Yesterday, we focused on Paul's prayers for the Ephesians. Today, we begin Paul's letter to the Colossians. What do we find? We find another prayer on behalf of another congregation. Paul reaches beyond the walls of his Roman confinement to touch a world in prayer. We can do the same. Look again at his prayer and consider his petitions.

Paul prays that God's wisdom will lead the way: *"We ask God to give you complete knowledge of His will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding."*

And that God's power will enable the way: *"We also pray that you will be strengthened with all His glorious power so you will have all the endurance and patience you need."*

So that God's purpose and plan may be their way: *"Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit."*

As that happens, Paul asks the Lord to fill their hearts with joy and thanksgiving so His presence and blessing would be gloriously displayed: *"May you be filled with joy, always thanking the Father. He has enabled you to share in the inheritance that belongs to His people, who live in the light."*

How about that for a prayer? Do you see its value? Voice it for yourself today. And while you are at it, reach beyond your walls and pray the same for others. And God can really do this? Consider again Paul's description of Jesus and answer the question for yourself.

"Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through Him, God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see—such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world. Everything was created through Him and for Him. He existed before anything else, and He holds all creation together. Christ is also the head of the Church, which is His body. He is the beginning, supreme over all who rise from the dead. So He is first in everything. For God in all His fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through Him God reconciled everything to Himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross." (Colossians 1:15-20)

Because of Jesus, God can answer Paul's prayer and more. Let's not settle for less. Instead, let's pray like Paul and see what God will do.

December 9
Colossians 1:24–4:18

And now, just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must continue to follow Him. Let your roots grow down into Him, and let your lives be built on Him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness. (Colossians 2:6–7)

Paul seeks to strengthen the church in Colossae from his confinement in Rome. The apostle was not a part of the church's formation but writes now to encourage them in their developing faith. The verses above represent the letter's defining command. He challenges the believers in Colossae to deepen and live out their faith in Jesus Christ. The life of faith involves more than a single response. The Christian life is a series of faith responses that move us forward with the Lord. That's Paul's point as he directs the Colossians, *"Just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must continue to follow Him."*

Yes, we accept Jesus as Lord by faith—our initial response. Having received Jesus by faith, however, we also follow Him. Paul's language is even more descriptive than merely following Jesus. He commands the believers to *"walk in Him."* The verb (*peripateō*), *"to walk,"* suggests a continuing activity. Paul also highlights that it is spiritual in nature. We are to *"walk in Him,"* or said another way—we are to *"live in Him."* Paul expresses the idea further by adding, *"let your roots grow down into Him, and let your lives be built on Him."* It was always supposed to be a spiritual experience, not a religious one.

How does it work? Once more, it is driven by faith. Just as we respond to Jesus initially, we continue to renew our faith daily. That doesn't happen by accident. We choose to relate to Jesus consistently by faith. We turn to Him. We act upon His words. As Paul describes, we *"grow strong in the truth."* *Indeed, Paul later appeals, "Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom He gives." (Colossian 3:15)*

Paul does more than appeal. He commands the believers to fill their hearts and minds with Christ's message. His words are to live within them so they experience the effect of His presence in personal ways. Of course, Jesus first introduced this necessity when He said, *"You are truly My disciples if you remain faithful to My teachings. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* (*John 8:31–32*)

Do you see how it works? We relate to Jesus by faith as we focus on His Word and follow His lead. This should be the pattern of our lives. As we have accepted Jesus by faith, we continue to walk in Jesus by faith, being influenced daily by the spiritual dynamic of His presence and Word. That should be what we are seeking right now. Do we stop reading and reflecting upon God's Word as we reach the end of our chronological Bible reading? Certainly not! We continue to place ourselves before the Lord as we open the Scriptures. We actively let the message about Christ fill our lives in all its richness--not for a day or a year. We do so for a lifetime.

Let's conclude today's devotion as we began, *"And now, just as you accepted Christ Jesus as your Lord, you must continue to follow Him. Let your roots grow down into Him, and let your lives be built on Him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness." (Colossians 2:6–7)*

December 10

Philemon 1:1-30; Philippians 1:1-2:11

This letter is from Paul, a prisoner for preaching the Good News about Christ Jesus, and from our brother Timothy. I am writing to Philemon, our beloved co-worker, and to our sister Apphia, and to our fellow soldier Archippus, and to the Church that meets in your house. (Philemon 1-2)

Today's reading included a private letter written by Paul to his beloved friend and co-worker, Philemon. It is the shortest of Paul's New Testament correspondence. Though brief, its content communicates an important message. Plainly stated, the gospel of Jesus Christ is intended to change lives. We observe this in several ways.

First, the good news of Jesus affected the heart and life of Philemon. Some believe Paul was instrumental in leading this wealthy Roman citizen to faith in Christ. Or, at the very least, the apostle significantly contributes to Philemon's spiritual development. Paul reminds his dear friend of this fact when he writes, *"You owe me your very soul!" (Philemon 19)* These words indicate the two men's close relationship—probably formed while Paul was in Ephesus (Acts 19:8–10; 20:31).

Philemon is now a leader in the nearby church in Colossae. He hosts the congregation in his home, with the support of Apphia (his wife) and Archippus (perhaps his son). His influence among the Colossians is undeniable. It is as a Christian leader and brother that Paul makes a request. He asks Philemon to do something that would be culturally radical. He requests that Philemon forgive and spiritually embrace his runaway slave, Onesimus. It appears that Onesimus stole from his former master and then fled to Rome. While in Rome, Paul becomes Onesimus' spiritual father, likely leading the young man to faith in Jesus. (Philemon 10)

But now, the impact of the gospel needs to be observed. Paul asks his son in the faith, Onesimus, to return to the man he wronged, Philemon. His story highlights the courage necessary to do the right thing despite potential consequences. Onesimus could be punished by severe whipping or, even worse, death. Paul asks his young disciple to place his life in God's hands as he faces responsibility for his previous actions, and Onesimus agrees. He accompanied Tychicus as he delivered the letter to the church in Colossae and the private letter to Philemon.

Yet, Paul also asks Philemon to display courage and Christian love. He urges his former co-laborer to do something culturally radical by forgiving Onesimus and, even more, to embrace him as a brother. Paul writes, *"It seems you lost Onesimus for a little while so that you could have him back forever. He is no longer like a slave to you. He is more than a slave, for he is a beloved brother, especially to me. Now he will mean much more to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord."* (Philemon 15–16)

Do note. Paul does not demand such action, though it may have been his right. He appeals for this response due to Jesus' continuing influence upon Philemon's life. Some, however, are critical of Paul's writings because he fails to denounce the Roman system of slavery that afflicted over 60 million people in his day. Yet, Paul introduces a transformative way of thinking that will eventually eliminate the degrading system. Or, more to the point, Paul points Jesus' followers to actions that reflect Jesus' presence and influence—for the gospel is intended to change lives.

What about us? In what ways do we display similar courage and faith? In what ways is Jesus asking us to do the right thing and trust Him? Yes, the letter to Philemon is brief but has far-reaching ramifications. Will we take its message to heart? Will you?

December 11

Philippians 2:12-4:23

Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice! (Philippians 4:4)

Paul writes Philippians (as he did Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon) from a place of confinement in Rome. However, he does not allow his imprisonment to rob him of joy within. The apostle expresses tremendous joy throughout his brief letter and urges the believers in Philippi to experience the same. “*Always be full of joy in the Lord,*” he writes. “*I say it again—rejoice!*”

Is this even possible? Do note: Happiness and joy are not the same. The term “*happiness*” is based upon the Middle English word “*hap*,” which means chance. In other words, happiness depends upon happenstance, circumstance, or what's happening in a person's life. Joy, in contrast, is derived from who's happening. Look again at Paul's command. “*Always be full of joy IN THE LORD.*” Jesus is the key or catalyst. He's the source of what we need. Again, biblical joy is not based on what's happening but on who's happening. When we recognize Jesus' presence and His continuing work of grace by faith, we can rejoice in Him—regardless of the circumstances. Are we doing so?

How is this possible? Think of it this way. Don't pursue joy as an objective. Experience joy as a byproduct. Happiness is something that people seek. They chase after happenings and circumstances that potentially exhilarate the heart. Joy is different. We discover joy as we relate to Jesus by faith for who He is. It's a spiritual byproduct of our trust in Him. As Paul describes for the Galatians, it's the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22). In other words, we don't chase it. We enjoy it as we actively relate to the Lord for who He is. That's why Paul directs the believers to rejoice IN THE LORD. You can't command an emotion. You can only command an action that will, in turn, lift the heart.

So, what do we do? I propose the following approach: Consistently smile at the Lord's presence, power, and promises. We typically smile at something or someone we perceive as good. So, begin each day by smiling at the Lord. Allow a simple smile to be your initial act of faith. Smile at His presence, the sufficiency of His power for the day ahead, and His promises on your behalf. By faith, smile at the Lord. Before you talk yourself out of it, try it—even now. And then, as you go through the day, acknowledge His presence again, and again, and again. Remind yourself that you are never alone, that His hand is always at work, and that His promises are ever true. Smile and smile again.

And when the circumstances are difficult? I'm not recommending that we grin and bear it. Rather, I'm proposing we recognize the Lord's presence and smile. We renew our trust in the One who pledges never to leave or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). Further, I encourage us to talk with the Lord about whatever distresses us. Paul later adds, “*Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank Him for all He has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.*” (Philippians 4:6–7) See the connection? We smile at the One with us, then place our fears and concerns into His hand. We choose to trust in the Lord, opening our hearts again to His peace and joy.

So, will we rejoice in the Lord? I don't pretend that this is always easy because it's not. The circumstances of life will often wipe the smile from our faces. However, I am reminding us of our spiritual remedy. We can experience God's daily joy and peace as we renew our faith and trust in Him. The question is, “Will we do so?” Will you? Do I see a smile forming? Come on. Let's smile at the One who is with us and rejoice!

December 12

James 1:1-3:18

This letter is from James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ. (James 1:1.)

Today's reading moves us into the New Testament book of James. James is the leader of the Jerusalem church and notably the half-brother of Jesus (the son of Mary and Joseph). But you would never know that by reading his letter. James refuses to elevate himself. Instead, he describes himself in the humblest of terms. He is a slave of God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Of all the ways James might introduce himself, he portrays himself as a lowly servant because that is how he views himself. He is God's servant. At the same time, James elevates Jesus in the highest of ways. Though James is his half-brother, he is not Jesus' equal. Instead, he presents Jesus as God's equal because that is who He is—the incarnation of God Himself. And James? He is a believer in and servant to the Lord Jesus Christ. And our testimony?

James consistently highlights this disposition as he writes his letter. For example, a servant should obey one's Master. So, if we are God's slaves (and we are), we should consistently act upon His Word. James appeals, *“Don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves”* (James 1:22). That was certainly James' attitude. Is it ours? Consider James' warning against bias within the Church (James 2:1-13). Sadly, we can become as self-serving as the world if we are not careful. We can view people in terms of what they can do for us instead of how God loves and views them. James challenges us to honor the Lord as we relate to those around us, particularly the poor. The question is, “Will we?” Will we be doers of God's Word and not hearers only?

James expands the emphasis further by highlighting the relationship between faith and works. Authentic faith, James insists, should manifest itself in tangible ways. True faith is more than a verbal confession. It is a response of the heart that leads a person to action. “Living” faith is precisely that—a belief that affects life. To argue that one has faith in God but never displays His influence is delusional. Indeed, confessing Jesus as Lord and not following His lead is contradictory. Servants are supposed to obey their Masters. Living faith is supposed to impact one's life. As James states, *“Just as the body is dead without breath, so also faith is dead without good works.”* (James 2:26) So the question is, “Is our faith breathing, living? Is Jesus' influence evident?”

All of this brings us back to James. He lived a life that was consistent with his faith in Jesus Christ. He is described by extrabiblical writers Clement and Hegesippus as “James the Just.” In other words, James does more than talk about his faith. He lives it out. So much so that James will ultimately suffer a martyr's death because he openly trusts in Christ. James will prove himself to be a true slave of God and the Lord Jesus Christ to the end.

And our testimony? Let's not simply read the book of James today and tomorrow. As believers and followers of Jesus Christ, let's become doers of the Word. Let's take a lesson from today's reading and do something about it in the future. Will you join me?

December 13
James 4:1-5:20; 1 Timothy 1:1-2:15

As the Scriptures say, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." (James 4:6)

As I noted yesterday, James refuses to elevate himself in a spiritually unhealthy way. He views himself instead as a servant and states as much. *"This letter is from James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ" (James 1:1). This is not false humility on James's part. He genuinely views himself as a servant because he recognizes the greatness of God and that of His Son, Jesus Christ. He understands it is better to be a servant to the living God than pretending to be something we are not—self-made and independent. Think about it. Who really controls one's future? As James notes,*

"Look here, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit.' How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it's here a little while, then it's gone. What you ought to say is, 'If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that.' Otherwise, you are boasting about your own pretentious plans, and all such boasting is evil." (James 4:13–16)

We are not nearly as independent as we pretend and are foolish to think otherwise. The better approach is to adopt James' disposition. He recognizes (as should we) that we are utterly dependent upon the Lord, and humility is the right attitude. Indeed, James promotes a spiritual principle that should guide our daily lives. And what is it? Simply put, *"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." (James 4:6)* The lesson is clear and to the point. We are not self-made or independent; to think otherwise will position us outside God's provision and help. The proper response is to humble oneself before the Lord to experience the steady flow of God's grace and provision. Which is most descriptive of you?

Of course, maintaining the right disposition is not always simple. Pride and self-centeredness are frequently a battle. James then appeals, *"Humble yourselves before God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come close to God, and God will come close to you. Wash your hands, you sinners; purify your hearts, for your loyalty is divided between God and the world. Let there be tears for what you have done. Let there be sorrow and deep grief. Let there be sadness instead of laughter, and gloom instead of joy. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and He will lift you up in honor." (James 4:7–10)*

The devil will do everything he can to push us to the wrong side of James' guiding principle, outside of God's grace. And if not the devil, sometimes our stubbornness and pride will push us in the wrong direction. James prescribes the appropriate solution. Humbly draw near to the Lord, even if it requires repentance and cleansing. As stated above, it is better to be a servant to the living God than to pretend to be something we are not.

Let's then take James' appeal to heart. Pride and self-sufficiency are not our friends. Instead, let's humble ourselves before the Lord so we might experience even more of His grace and activity.

December 14

1 Timothy 3:1-6:10

Don't let anyone think less of you because you are young. Be an example to all believers in what you say, in the way you live, in your love, your faith, and your purity. (1 Timothy 4:12)

Yesterday, we began reading Paul's first letter to his protégé, Timothy. Timothy stands out among Paul's many associates and is characterized in the most commendable terms. He's described as a “fellow worker” (Romans 16:21), a “brother” (Colossians 1:1), a “slave of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:1), and a “beloved and faithful child in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 4:17). Paul also refers to the young disciple as his “true son in the faith” (1 Timothy 1:2). It's evident that a spiritual bond exists between the apostle and Timothy.

We are introduced initially to Timothy as Paul enlists him to join the team at the start of his second missionary journey (Acts 16:1-2). Timothy witnesses Paul and Silas' early successes and challenges as they carry the good news of Jesus Christ into Macedonia. Timothy will also become a trusted representative and envoy on Paul's behalf. In time, the youthful disciple matures into one of the Church's more effective leaders.

The book of 1 Timothy is the first of two letters Paul directs to his “son in the faith.” Timothy had been sent to Ephesus because of a few developing problems. Paul now writes to guide his faithful emissary as he confronts the congregational issues, notably the emergence of false teaching. Paul commands Timothy to lead the way by word and action. He must not be ashamed of his youth or be intimidated by the opposition around him. Paul appeals, “Be an example to all believers in what you say, in the way you live, in your love, your faith, and your purity.” (1 Timothy 4:12) Too much is at stake for Timothy to neglect his responsibility. The congregation's spiritual health and impact are in jeopardy. Paul writes,

“But you, Timothy, are a man of God; so run from all these evil things. Pursue righteousness and a godly life, along with faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness. Fight the good fight for the true faith. Hold tightly to the eternal life to which God has called you, which you have declared so well before many witnesses. And I charge you before God, who gives life to all, and before Christ Jesus, who gave a good testimony before Pontius Pilate, that you obey this command without wavering. Then no one can find fault with you from now until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again.” (1 Timothy 6:11-14)

Are we living up to our responsibilities? Are we fighting the good fight? Paul's words are as relevant to us as they were to Timothy so long ago. We, too, must pursue righteousness and godliness, influenced by faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness. Are we doing so? To motivate Timothy and us, Paul adds,

“At just the right time, Christ will be revealed from heaven by the blessed and only almighty God, the King of all kings and Lord of all lords. He alone can never die, and He lives in light so brilliant that no human can approach Him. No human eye has ever seen Him, nor ever will. All honor and power to Him forever! Amen.” (1 Timothy 6:11-16)

Are we living with Jesus' return in view? Are we being influenced by the wonder and glory of who He is? I pray the answer is “yes” and accept that Paul's letter is also directed toward our lives. Come on. Let's fight the good fight!

December 15

1 Timothy 6:11-21; Titus 1:1-3:15; 2 Timothy 1:1-18

I am writing to Titus, my true son in the faith that we share. May God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior give you grace and peace. (Titus 1:4)

Today's reading includes Paul's letter to Titus, another young minister with whom Paul works. Paul likely led Titus to faith in Jesus during his first missionary journey and then invested his time and energy into the young believer's life.

Interestingly, Titus is not mentioned in the Book of Acts. However, Paul refers to his associate 13 times in his letters. And, of course, we have a letter directed to Titus by name. What do we learn from these many references? We're informed that Titus' background is Gentile (Galatians 2:3) and that he travels with Paul to the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). He serves as an example of the difference that the gospel can make among the Gentiles. In Paul's letters to Corinth, we also learn that Titus becomes (like Timothy) a reliable representative and messenger. It is noteworthy that Paul sends his young associate into difficult situations because he trusts Titus' judgment and potential actions.

That is evident in Paul's letter to Titus. Paul and Titus travel to Crete following Paul's release from his imprisonment. The apostle then leaves Titus in Crete to support the developing congregation. The surrounding culture is negatively influencing the church, and it is struggling with some of the false teachings of the day. Paul is counting on Titus to help the congregation work through these problems and subsequently writes his letter to provide further instructions. He also directs Titus to appoint leaders within the surrounding churches. These leaders, however, must reflect Jesus' continuing influence. They should display the marks of spiritual maturity.

Paul writes, *“An elder must live a blameless life. He must be faithful to his wife, and his children must be believers who don't have a reputation for being wild or rebellious. A church leader is a manager of God's household, so he must live a blameless life. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered; he must not be a heavy drinker, violent, or dishonest with money. Rather, he must enjoy having guests in his home, and he must love what is good. He must live wisely and be just. He must live a devout and disciplined life. He must have a strong belief in the trustworthy message he was taught; then he will be able to encourage others with wholesome teaching and show those who oppose it where they are wrong.” (Titus 1:6-9)*

Paul provides similar guidance to Timothy (1 Timothy 3:2-7). What can we learn from the list? First, effective leadership requires appropriate maturity. Paul's instructions highlight someone actively following Jesus. It's a snapshot of spiritual maturity. Truth be known—every believer in Jesus should seek to reflect the same qualities. How does your life compare?

Second, the list highlights continuing characteristics, not a one-time checklist. That's important because the Christian life is a continuing work of grace. The prayer is for a person to reflect Jesus' influence consistently, not periodically or sporadically. The spiritually mature person learns to walk in ways that reflect Jesus' character and teachings more times than not. Will they be perfect? No, but the general direction of their lives should reveal their faith and devotion. So, look at the list again. Are you allowing your faith to impact your life in these ways? Do you think you should? May the Lord encourage us to do so. Indeed, may we increasingly display the marks of spiritual maturity.

December 16

2 Timothy 2:1-4:18

As for me, my life has already been poured out as an offering to God. The time of my death is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful. And now the prize awaits me—the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on the day of His return. And the prize is not just for me but for all who eagerly look forward to His appearing. (2 Timothy 4:6–8)

The book of 2 Timothy is Paul's final New Testament letter, which he again writes from a prison cell. This time, he will not be released—and Paul knows it. God's servant anticipates his death is drawing near. Of course, it is not the first time the apostle's life was threatened. He's been stoned and left for dead (Acts 14:19-20). He's been whipped, beaten, and shipwrecked (2 Corinthians 6:3-10). Paul even had a group of assassins take an oath not to eat or drink until the apostle was dead (Acts 23:12). Yes, Paul is familiar with the prospects of dying. Yet, something appears different this time. Paul senses that he will soon make the ultimate sacrifice for Jesus' sake. Can we imagine the emotions he might feel?

Paul's attitude, however, is not defeated or discouraged. He's fought the good fight. In his mind, he has finished his race. And his death? Paul views his pending execution as one final act of worship. His life is being poured out like a drink offering before the Lord—an offering worthy of the God he serves. Yet, Paul also looks beyond his death and anticipates a future prize—a promised crown of righteousness. The apostle knows that there is more than this life. Paul's sacrifice will appear insignificant compared to the blessings he will gain. As Paul explains to the Corinthians, *“So we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever.”* (2 Corinthians 4:18) Paul fixes his gaze on God's future promise, not the present circumstances. What about us?

Paul's testimony should challenge and instruct our hearts. He forces us to take a fresh look at what is truly important—the priorities that should shape our lives. Earlier in the letter, Paul described the proper outlook to Timothy. He writes, *“This is a trustworthy saying: If we die with Him, we will also live with Him. If we endure hardship, we will reign with Him. If we deny Him, He will deny us. If we are unfaithful, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny who He is.”* (2 Timothy 2:11–13) Is this our perspective? Should it be?

Church writers Tertullian and Eusebius inform us that Paul would indeed be executed as he anticipated. During Nero's reign as emperor, God's apostle to the Gentiles would be cruelly beheaded. Paul would step from this life to the blessings that await. I pray his example challenges us to maintain the same perspective and mindset. As Paul expressed to the Philippians, *“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”* (Philippians 1:21) Paul believed that. May we learn to confess the same.

December 17

2 Timothy 4:19-22; Hebrews 1:1-4:13

Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. And now in these final days, He has spoken to us through His Son. God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, and through the Son he created the universe. The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God, and He sustains everything by the mighty power of His command. When He had cleansed us from our sins, He sat down in the place of honor at the right hand of the majestic God in heaven. (Hebrews 1:1-3)

Today, we conclude 2 Timothy and begin reading the New Testament book of Hebrews. It is worth noting that Hebrews does not include an introduction or salutation. It's written much more like an essay than a letter or correspondence. Though the author is unnamed, people nevertheless speculate. Some suggest that it may be another letter from the pen of Paul, despite the distinct form and style. Others point to Barnabas or Apollos as the potential author. Other possibilities include Luke or Clement of Rome. The truth is this: we don't definitively know who the author may be. We can recognize, however, that the writer possesses a deep faith in Jesus Christ and seeks to open the readers' eyes to the wonder and truth of who Jesus is.

And to whom is the letter or essay written? Again, the recipients are not explicitly identified. The book was later assigned the title Hebrews because it highlights the superiority of Jesus over the key figures and practices of the Jewish faith. For example, Jesus is superior to the angels described in the Old Testament (1:4-2:18). He is superior to Moses (3:1-6) and Joshua (4:8), to Aaron (5:1-10), and even the Levitical priesthood (7:1-28). Jesus and His actions are more significant than any of the religious practices that played a vital role among God's old covenant people. Jesus' sacrifice and intercession surpass them all because Jesus is greater than all. Is that how we see Him?

The writer doesn't ease us into this understanding. From his opening statement to the end, he heralds Jesus' uniqueness and greatness. Look again at the opening verses highlighted above. The author identifies Jesus to be none other than God's divine Son. He is the Son of God, who created all that we see and know. Yes, He is the unique Son of God who radiates God's glory and expresses God's character. As translated in the English Standard Version, Jesus is *"the exact imprint"* of God's nature. Think about that. The depictions of Jesus in the gospels are snapshots of God Himself as He responds with compassion and love to those around Him. Jesus is God incarnate—in the flesh. And concerning Jesus' work of salvation, Jesus is sufficient. The writer declares, *"When He had cleansed us from our sins, He sat down in the place of honor at the right hand of the majestic God in heaven."* (Hebrews 1:3) Is this how we see Jesus? Do you think we should?

I pray the book of Hebrews will open our eyes further to Jesus' identity and impact. He is greater than anyone has ever been. Jesus is the revelation of God Himself, who intercedes on our behalf. May we respond to Him with renewed faith and devotion. Let's celebrate Jesus' greatness and follow His lead, even into the day ahead. Jesus is worthy of both. May His name be praised!

December 18 Hebrews 4:14–7:28

So then, since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for He faced all of the same testings we do, yet He did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive His mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most. (Hebrews 4:14–16)

Who is Jesus? How are we to relate to Him? With Christmas only a week away, consider the book of Hebrews' testimony concerning Jesus. He is far more than a man or religious leader. He is the Son of God, superior to angels, greater than Moses and Joshua, and spiritually more effective than Aaron and the whole of the Levitical priesthood. Jesus is who we need.

Look again at Jesus' description as our great High Priest. He is unlike any other. Having entered into heaven, He intercedes directly on our behalf. There's no distance or potential obstacles. Jesus, as the God/man, is the perfect mediator in every way possible. He can address our sins and secure God's provision on our behalf. Jesus is more than the great High Priest. He's the perfect High Priest.

Think about it. Jesus understands our weaknesses and loves us still. As the writer of Hebrews notes, He was tempted and tested in every way imaginable—yet without sin. His victories, however, do not leave Jesus impatient or unsympathetic toward our struggles. Instead, His experiences awaken compassion and mercy within. Jesus empathizes with our weaknesses, which makes His intercession even more effective. Again, Jesus is the perfect High Priest in so many ways.

And the appropriate response? First, as the writer of Hebrews describes, we are to hold firmly to our faith. Or, more personally, we should hold firmly to our High Priest. Don't allow the shame or regret of your failures to push you away from Him. Acknowledge your sin honestly and hold fast to His ability to address your guilt. Of course, this is more than saying, "I'm sorry." We seek forgiveness so we might also learn to walk in Jesus' victory—or at least, we should.

That is the second aspect of our response. We should come boldly to God's throne to receive mercy and grace. We first seek mercy for the forgiveness we require. But we also seek grace so we can stand and walk again. The goal is victory. We seek Jesus' strength and sufficiency so we can prevail. Be encouraged. "We will find grace to help us when we need it most."

So, with Christmas a week away, we have a lot to celebrate—the birth of a Savior and a High Priest. Let's hold firmly to our faith and experience the difference Jesus makes.

December 19

Hebrews 8:1-10:39

When God speaks of a “new” covenant, it means He has made the first one obsolete. It is now out of date and will soon disappear. (Hebrews 8:13)

Jesus, the Son of God, did more than breathe new life into God's covenant people. As the writer of Hebrews describes, Jesus initiates a “new” covenant altogether, making the first one obsolete. Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension introduce new spiritual realities that should encourage and excite the heart. Today's reading highlights different ways that this is true. For example, as noted yesterday, Jesus' role as High Priest exceeds anything previously known. The Levitical priesthood served in a Tabernacle made by human hands. Jesus, however, enters a greater, more perfect Tabernacle that is not part of this created world. Even more, the book of Hebrews declares, *“With His own blood—not the blood of goats and calves—He (Jesus) entered the Most Holy Place once for all time and secured our redemption forever.” (Hebrews 9:11–12)*

Do we understand the significance of this distinction? In a spiritual sense, the “old” Tabernacle foreshadowed a greater spiritual reality that Jesus would fulfill. The superiority is observed as Jesus appears personally before God on our behalf (Hebrews 9:24). Jesus' intercession is also eternally effective. Indeed, as stated above, Jesus secures our redemption forever. Think about that. In the “old” covenant, sacrifices were offered repeatedly because the blood of bulls and goats was inadequate. As the writer of Hebrews explains, *“It is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” (Hebrews 10:4)*

Jesus' sacrifice, however, proves entirely sufficient. Christ was offered once, and that was enough (Hebrews 9:28). As the sinless Son of God, Jesus' death on the cross secures forgiveness and life for everyone who believes in Him. He fulfills God's declaration through His prophet Jeremiah, *“This is the new covenant I will make with My people on that day, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.”* Then He says, *“I will never again remember their sins and lawless deeds.” (Hebrews 10:16–17)*

Let that register for a moment. Our faith in Jesus as Savior forever changes our standing before God, and our hearts should rejoice. This good news should strengthen us within. As the writer of Hebrews appeals, *“Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm, for God can be trusted to keep His promise.” (Hebrews 10:23)*

Yet, we should also seek to strengthen each other. The writer adds, *“Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of His return is drawing near.” (Hebrews 10:24–25)*

May God open our eyes today to the beautiful truth of the “new” covenant in Jesus. Let us rejoice and be glad, for it is worthy of some excitement!

December 20

Hebrews 11:1-12:29

Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see. Through their faith, the people in days of old earned a good reputation. (Hebrews 11:1-2)

Faith, generally speaking, is active—not passive. One's trust in God and His Word moves a person to act and react in noticeable ways, or at least it should. Our reading today highlights a series of examples that illustrate this is true. For example, the writer of Hebrews points to the distinguishing quality of Abel's offering. Abel's faith in God motivated him to present the best portions of his flock (Genesis 4:4) to God. His actions display his faith.

Similarly, Enoch's faith enabled him to walk with God for 300 years (Genesis 5:23-24). Think about that—for 300 years, Enoch's trust in God influenced his life's character and direction so much that God received Enoch to Himself without ever having to die. Which is more mystifying? The fact that Enoch did not die or that he was able to walk with the Lord for 300 years. How is that possible? It's only possible one day at a time. Seven days become a week, weeks become months, and then months become years. But at each point along the way, the day before us is what matters. Will we respond to God in faith or not? As the writer of Hebrews explains, *“Anyone who wants to come to Him must believe that God exists and that He rewards those who sincerely seek Him.”* Genuine faith is active, not passive.

The list of examples in the Book of Hebrews continues. The writer points to Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He reminds us of Joseph's faith and that of Moses and his parents. He likewise highlights the unexpected faith of Rahab, a foreign prostitute who trusts the Lord. The distinguishing quality throughout is the person's active faith. It's not their verbal confessions but their physical actions that demonstrate their trust in God. Can the same be said of us? Let's examine our lives for a moment. What can we point to that highlights an active faith and trust?

The writer of Hebrews highlights the many examples to call us to action. *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting Him, He endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now He is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne.”* (Hebrews 12:1-2)

We should stop making excuses. We should stop justifying our indifference or disobedience. Instead, we should focus on Jesus and step forward by faith. With each new day, like Enoch, we believe God rewards those who seek Him—one day at a time. Like the saints of old, we allow our trust in God's promises to influence our choices and actions. We follow Jesus' example, who stepped faithfully toward the cross because He knew the promise of what would result. Yes. Jesus displays an active trust in the Father's plan and purpose, and so should we. Will it be easy? Certainly not! Will God prove faithful and strengthen our hearts in the process? Absolutely yes! Let's then do more than confess our faith. Let's choose to do something with it—including today. Will you join me?

December 21
Hebrews 13:1-25; 1 Peter 1:1-2:3

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. (Hebrews 13:8)

Today, we conclude reading Hebrews and begin reading the first of Peter's two letters. The writer of Hebrews closes out by encouraging those who believe in Jesus to live as if they do. He extends a series of practical commands to highlight Jesus' impact. They include loving each other as brothers and sisters (Hebrews 13:2), showing hospitality to strangers (Hebrews 13:3), remaining faithful to one's marriage vows (Hebrews 13:4), the importance of trusting in God's provision and care (Hebrews 13:5-6), imitating faithful leaders among us (Hebrews 13:7), and resisting those who would lead us astray (Hebrews 13:8-9).

Each directive portrays how we should live out our faith. The question is, "Are we doing so?" Are we honoring Jesus, who is (as noted above) *"the same yesterday, today, and forever."* Are we presenting to Jesus the devotion and praise He deserves? The writer of Hebrews appeals, *"Let us offer through Jesus a continual sacrifice of praise to God, proclaiming our allegiance to His name. And don't forget to do good and to share with those in need. These are the sacrifices that please God."* (Hebrews 13:15-16) Again, are we doing so? If not, why not? As emphasized yesterday, genuine faith is active, not passive. Our faith in Jesus should affect our lives in noticeable ways.

Of course, Peter makes the same emphasis and appeal. He challenges those who know Jesus to reflect His continuing influence, even amid life's trials and tribulations. It isn't theoretical for Peter; the apostle pens his letter from a prison cell. He understands firsthand that life is often difficult but recognizes that hardship should refine our lives—not defeat us (1 Peter 1:6-7). That's the nature of living faith. And the lesson for the day? It should be obvious. Our faith in Jesus Christ should affect who we are becoming. Jesus should influence our behavior, relationships, and even our outlook. Jesus should make a recognizable difference. One final time, I ask, "Are we allowing Him to do so?" Let's close with Peter's call to action.

"So prepare your minds for action and exercise self-control. Put all your hope in the gracious salvation that will come to you when Jesus Christ is revealed to the world. So you must live as God's obedient children. Don't slip back into your old ways of living to satisfy your own desires. You didn't know any better then. But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy. For the Scriptures say, 'You must be holy because I am holy.'" (1 Peter 1:13-16)

Come on. Let's live out our faith!

December 22

1 Peter 2:4-5:11

You are chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for He called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9)

Peter writes to the Church across Asia Minor. He seeks to reassure them as they endure significant persecution because of their faith in Jesus Christ. The apostle reminds them that God works through their difficulties to refine their lives and to reflect Christ's glory as they respond to life's challenges with grace and strength. Peter also speaks to the believers in the most elevated of terms. He refers to them as *"a chosen people," "royal priests," "a holy nation,"* and *"God's very own possession."* Each description is rooted in Old Testament imagery concerning God's "old" covenant people, Israel (Deuteronomy 7: 6; 10:15; Exodus 19:5-6; Isaiah 43:21). Adopting this language highlights the privileged position Jesus' followers now enjoy. They have become God's "new" covenant people and represent those to whom and through whom God relates.

Do we recognize the privilege that is ours? We are not rescued and forgiven by Jesus to live insignificant lives. God has chosen us with a purpose. He enables us to become a royal priesthood that grants us spiritual access to our God and King so we might serve as His representatives. Additionally, God establishes us as citizens in His new kingdom. He sets us apart unto Himself—a holy nation. And if that isn't enough, we are described as God's cherished possession. We are not overlooked or ignored. We are treasured by the God who saves us. Is that how we view ourselves? Do you think we should? How differently would we approach each day if we began by saying to ourselves:

"I am loved and chosen by God."

"I can relate directly to God and serve Him fully."

"I am a citizen of God's kingdom with all afforded rights, privileges, and responsibilities."

"There's never a day that God will not think of me or relate to me as His own."

Again, Peter writes to a group of people enduring tremendous hardship. It would be easy for them to become defeated and think negatively about themselves. The apostle, however, writes to remind them who Jesus has made them to be. One of the statements above should strengthen the heart, but think about the implications of each. Peter goes on to add, *"Once you had no identity as a people; now you are God's people. Once you received no mercy; now you have received God's mercy." (1 Peter 2:10)*

Of course, Jesus is the key. He's the One who's changed our standing and affords us this great privilege and honor. Let's take the apostle's words to heart and enter the day ahead with a renewed perspective. As we do, we can show others the goodness of God, for He has called us out of the darkness into His wonderful light. Will you join me?

December 23

1 Peter 5:12-14; 2 Peter 1:1-3:18

By His divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. We have received all of this by coming to know Him, the One who called us to Himself by means of His marvelous glory and excellence. (2 Peter 1:3)

Every time I read Peter's words above, my heart is encouraged. He informs us that we have everything we need to live a godly life. Think about that for a moment. As a believer in Jesus Christ, you possess everything necessary to live a God-honoring life. Nothing is lacking. Maybe we would argue otherwise. We point to a recent failure as evidence to the contrary, but that is not the case. The truth is this: we possess everything we need but may not avail ourselves of everything we have.

What do I mean? Consider God's provision to every believer. First, because of Jesus, our position with God has forever changed. As we noted yesterday, we have become *"a chosen people," "a royal priesthood," "a holy nation,"* and *"God's very own possession."* (1 Peter 1:9) This is who we are. Our standing has permanently changed, allowing us to experience God's power and activity on our behalf. The change, however, does not guarantee that we will take advantage of our newfound resources.

Second, God has also supplied His promises through the testimony of His Word. God's promises (centered in Jesus) serve as a spiritual catalyst. They focus our minds and then engage our hearts, facilitating God's activity. Peter explains, *"And because of His glory and excellence, He has given us great and precious promises. These are the promises that enable you to share His divine nature and escape the world's corruption caused by human desires."* (2 Peter 1:4)

Third, God likewise provides His power—His divine nature. Don't overlook the connection between God's promises and our ability to share in His nature. We receive God's Spirit as a gift, but we experience the transforming power of His presence by faith. Only as we acknowledge and yield ourselves to God's presence based on God's promises do we discover the sufficiency of God's power. Do you see the spiritual inter-dynamic? As Peter appeals, *"In view of all this, make every effort to respond to God's promises."* (2 Peter 1:5) Our knowledge and faith response to God's promises are required.

This brings us back to Peter's declaration, *"By His divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life."* Marvel with me over the possibilities of what this means. Instead of doubting Peter's claim or making excuses for our failures, let's step toward God's provision. Let's avail ourselves of our position, God's promises, and His transforming presence by faith. Admittedly, this is something we learn effectively over time. It involves more than a singular action or decision. We learn daily to trust in our spiritual position in Christ and the precious promises God extends. We also learn daily to rely upon God's power and presence within—sometimes through trial and error. The main thing is that we keep pressing forward by faith—that we never stop learning. Let's then ask the Lord to open our eyes anew to the spiritual possibilities and continue our faith journey with Jesus. In Him, we have everything we need!

December 24

1 John 1:1-4:6

*See how very much our Father loves us, for He calls us His children,
and that is what we are. (1 John 3:1)*

It's Christmas Eve, and our chronological readings continue. Our focus today is on John's first of three letters. The themes of 1 John seem especially appropriate as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, our Savior. Jesus was born as Mary's child so that we might become (as noted above) the children of God. Indeed, Jesus did all He did so that we might discover true life with the God who loves us. And, of course, John would know. He boldly declares, *"This One who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen Him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that He is the One who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then He was revealed to us."* (1 John 1:2)

God's gift of life is far more than forgiveness. It includes the privilege of fellowship with our Creator. Jesus enables us to become God's children so we might walk with Him accordingly. As John explains, *"God is light, and there is no darkness in Him at all. So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth. But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, cleanses us from all sin."* (1 John 1:5-7)

The term "fellowship" (koinonia) emphasizes more than casual interaction. It suggests close communion—a shared life together. That's right. Jesus enables us to discover a shared life with God—God with us, and us with God, and even us with each other. So that, when we walk in the light, we are not following an impersonal set of rules. We are seeking, instead, the spiritual dynamic of fellowship with God. Our obedience positions us to enjoy more of His presence and activity. As Jesus explained, *"All who love Me will do what I say. My Father will love them, and We will come and make our home with each of them."* (John 14:23) Again, obedience is about fellowship—a shared life together.

And our disobedience? Our sin does not alter our identity with God. We remain God's children because of Jesus. Our disobedience, however, immediately diminishes life's goodness and fullness because it disrupts the fellowship we enjoy with the Lord. The idea that sin somehow adds to life is a lie. It always subtracts because it robs the person of the beauty and joy one's fellowship with God provides. Is any sin worth that?

What do we do when we drift into the shadows? We should promptly acknowledge our wrong and step again into the light. John describes it this way, *"But if we confess our sins to Him, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness."* (1 John 1:9) In other words, as we agree with God concerning the offense (confess our sins), God restores the fellowship our sin disrupted (He forgives and cleanses). Does this minimize our sin? Not if we remember the price Jesus paid to secure the privilege we enjoy (1 John 2:1-2). May we then never view sin or disobedience as incidental or small.

So, it's Christmas Eve! Let's celebrate the birth of our Savior and joyfully walk in the light!

December 25

1 John 4:7-5:21; 2 John 1:1-13; 3 John 1:1-15

And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped Him snugly in strips of cloth and laid Him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them. That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize Him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger!" (Luke 2:6-12)

God showed how much He loved us by sending His one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through Him. This is real love—not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins. (1 John 4:9-10)

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has become a child of God. (1 John 5:1)

And this is what God has testified: He has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have God's Son does not have life. (1 John 5:11-12)

May the passages above remind us of why we celebrate Christmas. We celebrate the birth of a Savior—whose name is Jesus. Marvel over God's love and step toward Him in fresh ways. May we also recognize the supreme gift we have freely received by faith. "Whoever has the Son," John declares, "has life."

Think about the implications of what that means on our behalf. In response, may we humble our hearts before the Lord and give thanks. May God fill our hearts and minds with the wonder of God's gift on our behalf.

Merry Christmas!

December 26

Jude 1:1-25; Revelation 1:1-2:29

Now all glory to God, who is able to keep you from falling away and will bring you with great joy into His glorious presence without a single fault. All glory to Him who alone is God, our Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord. All glory, majesty, power, and authority are His before all time, and in the present, and beyond all time! Amen. (Jude 1:24–25)

Today's reading includes the final two books of the New Testament—Jude's brief letter and the beginning chapters in John's notable book of Revelation. First, regarding Jude's letter, the writer appeals to those who genuinely know Jesus to be on guard against false teachers and fraudulent believers who demonstrate by their lives that they do not. He warns that they are like *"shameless shepherds who care only for themselves. They are like clouds blowing over the land without giving any rain. They are like trees in autumn that are doubly dead, for they bear no fruit and have been pulled up by the roots. They are like wild waves of the sea, churning up the foam of their shameful deeds. They are like wandering stars, doomed forever to blackest darkness."* (Jude 1:12–13)

Those who know and follow Jesus must display the appropriate discernment and avoid these individuals. At the same time, they are to build up the faith of those who recognize Jesus for who He is—our Master and Lord. That is quite the assertion for Jude (the brother of James) to make. A biological son to Mary and Joseph (and a half-brother to Jesus), Jude doesn't pretend to be Jesus' equal because he's not. He recognizes the uniqueness of Jesus and appeals to those who trust in Him to hold fast to Jesus to the very end. The good news is that God is the One who ultimately keeps us from faltering or falling away.

Jude's brief letter warns about the negative influences that will characterize the last days. In contrast, the book of Revelation lays out the final days themselves. John prophetically sees and describes what will unfold. Yet, before John records the dramatic events leading to Jesus' triumphant return, John describes a vision of the exalted Christ. He writes, *"And standing in the middle of the lampstands was someone like the Son of Man. He was wearing a long robe with a gold sash across his chest. His head and His hair were white like wool, as white as snow. And His eyes were like flames of fire. His feet were like polished bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice thundered like mighty ocean waves. He held seven stars in His right hand, and a sharp two-edged sword came from His mouth. And his face was like the sun in all its brilliance."* (Revelation 1:13–16)

John's response is to humble himself before the Lord and listen (Revelation 1:17–20). The scene reminds me of the gospel account when Peter, James, and John are permitted to see Jesus in His transfigured glory. From a cloud, God declares, *"This is My dearly loved Son, who brings Me great joy. Listen to Him."* (Matthew 17:5) The disciples are terrified and fall face down. John displays a similar reaction before the exalted Jesus in Revelation, and he listens to Him. The apostle listens and writes down a series of letters that Jesus dictates to seven congregations (Revelation 2–3). The letters indicate Jesus' spiritual awareness of each local congregation and their appropriate call to action.

Our reading today includes the initial four letters to the churches. We will read the remaining three tomorrow. Look again at Jesus' letters to the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, and Thyatira. Ask the Lord to open your spiritual eyes and ears. What is Jesus' message to His churches? Do we see the relevance in our day? I pray that God grants us ears to hear what the Spirit says and tender hearts to respond. Will you join me in the prayer? Will we respond to the Lord appropriately?

December 27

Revelation 3:1-6:17

And then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea. They sang: "Blessing and honor and glory and power belong to the One sitting on the throne and to the Lamb forever and ever." And the four living beings said, "Amen!" And the twenty-four elders fell down and worshiped the Lamb. (Revelation 5:13-14)

There's much in Revelation that's mysterious. Interpretively, we should avoid being too dogmatic as we attempt to explain the apocalyptic scenes and messages revealed. With God's help, however, we should latch on to lessons and truths that strengthen our hearts and deepen our devotion to Jesus—the One we follow. John wrote the book of Revelation with that intent. Consider Jesus' letters to the seven churches (Revelation 2-3). Though we may not grasp everything concerning Jesus' words, we should recognize the key ideas. Think about each:

- Ephesus—a church that is going through the motions.
- Smyrna—a church that is rich in things that spiritually matter.
- Pergamum—a church that publicly stands for Jesus but privately turns away.
- Thyatira—a church that is morally and spiritually compromised.
- Sardis—a church that is on spiritual life support.
- Philadelphia—a church that is an unstoppable force for Jesus.
- Laodicea—a church that pushes Jesus away because of self-sufficiency.

With which of the congregations do we most identify? Five of the seven have spiritual problems. Jesus appeals for them to turn to Him appropriately. I want to be a part of a church like the one in Philadelphia. They recognize their inadequacies and choose to walk with the Lord, who is more than sufficient (Revelation 3:8). They become (as Jesus describes) the church of the open door. In contrast, the church in Laodicea boasts about her sufficiency and drives Jesus out their door. Which would be most descriptive of us? May God grant us ears to hear what the Spirit is saying.

However, most of today's reading focuses on a dramatic worship scene in heaven. We see the Eternal God seated gloriously upon His throne. We also witness the appearance of a slaughtered but victorious Lamb (Jesus) who takes possession of a seven-sealed scroll. The Lamb, also identified as the Lion of Judah, assumes responsibility for the events that will soon unfold. The future is now in Jesus' hands. That is always a good lesson to remember.

Yet, our hearts should likewise be instructed by the many acts of worship portrayed. The four angelic beings and the twenty-four elders are not mere spectators. They physically respond to the presence and actions of God and the Lamb. Again and again, the angelic beings praise the Lord, and the twenty-four elders bow down in humble worship. And the lesson? Worship in heaven is always active, not passive. And worship on earth? Should we remain passive before Him if we recognize God for who He is and His actions on our behalf? True worship is a genuine response of the mind and heart to the revelation of God's presence, power, and activity. True worship is never passive. The worshiper is moved to say something or do something. Standing or sitting as an unaffected spectator is not an option. So, let's take worship lessons from heaven and respond to God's glory, power, and love—even today. Let's worship the LORD!

December 28 Revelation 7:1-10:11

When the Lamb broke the seventh seal on the scroll, there was silence throughout heaven for about half an hour. I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and they were given seven trumpets. (Revelation 8:1-2)

Today's reading reveals a series of disturbing scenes. With the breaking of the seventh seal, we observe an intensifying demonstration of God's judgment against sin. The earth's population has already suffered horribly as the earlier seals were opened. But now, with the breaking of the final seal, the degree of suffering is probably beyond our capacity to comprehend. With the warning blasts of seven trumpets, humanity discovers that the judgment of God is a terrifying reality. That should not surprise us. We have witnessed it before at Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19), with the plagues directed against Egypt (Exodus 7-12) and with the widespread loss of life and devastation that accompanied Israel's conquest of Canaan (Joshua 6-22). The scenes were uncomfortable then, and they should leave us unsettled now. They remind us of the seriousness of sin against a holy God. But do we grasp the lesson?

John describes the rebellious population as unrepentant. John writes, *"But the people who did not die in these plagues still refused to repent of their evil deeds and turn to God. They continued to worship demons and idols made of gold, silver, bronze, stone, and wood—idols that can neither see nor hear nor walk! And they did not repent of their murders or their witchcraft or their sexual immorality or their thefts."* (Revelation 9:20-21) How does a person not turn to God amid such suffering? But the population refuses to do so. They persist in their sin and rebellion, spiritually unaffected.

What about those who follow Jesus? They have suffered unmercifully at the hands of the rebellious before the sounding of the trumpets. Persecution against the Church has been severe, but the redeemed of God will stand victorious. As John describes, *"After this I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes and held palm branches in their hands. And they were shouting with a great roar, 'Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb!'"* (Revelation 7:9-10)

The Lamb redeems and ultimately provides for His own. As is later declared, *"They will never again be hungry or thirsty; they will never be scorched by the heat of the sun. For the Lamb on the throne will be their Shepherd. He will lead them to springs of life-giving water. And God will wipe every tear from their eyes."* (Revelation 7:16-17) Life and hope are in Jesus Christ.

With which of the two groups do we identify—the rebellious or the redeemed? Today's reading highlights the seriousness of sin and the necessity to turn to a Savior. May we stand with those who trust in Jesus Christ. As we do, let's take heart, *"For everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved."* (Romans 10:13) Indeed, may we join the chorus and say, *"Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb!"* Amen and Amen!

December 29 Revelation 11:1-14:20

Then I heard a loud voice shouting across the heavens, “It has come at last— salvation and power and the Kingdom of our God, and the authority of His Christ.” (Revelation 12:10)

Our reading today moves us into the portion of Revelation that attracts much attention. We are drawn to the dramatic imagery and naturally seek to make sense of all that John describes. For example, who are the two witnesses? Are they Elijah and Moses, as some suggest? Or do they symbolize the Church bearing witness to Christ during the first portion of the Great Tribulation? And what about the woman, the dragon, and the child? The language portraying them is cosmic in scope. What are we to make of them? And what about the beasts from the sea and the earth? Who do they represent, and are we to watch for their appearance?

Today’s reading provokes many questions—more than a single devotion can address. Instead, I focus on the larger testimony throughout John’s revelation. Simply stated, “God is in control.” That’s right. The future of God’s people is assured among all the mysteries that John describes. God’s purposes and plan will be fulfilled. And there’s nothing that the Devil (the red dragon) or his human pawns (the two beasts) can do to thwart God’s redemptive work of salvation.

Do note: The dragon does everything within his power to oppose the birth and impact of God’s promised child (Jesus) but fails. Jesus prevails, fulfilling all of God’s promises and prophecies. He is the One promised to Abraham and the descendants of Abraham who becomes a blessing to the families of the world (Genesis 12:3). He is God’s anointed and, as John describes, has been “*caught up to God and to His throne.*” (Revelation 12:5) No demonic or earthly power can stop it. Jesus is on the throne, and God is in control.

That doesn’t mean that difficulties will not come against God’s people. John warns that they will intensify. The dragon will war against those who hold to the testimony of Jesus (Revelation 12:17). In the final days, God’s people must patiently endure. As John appeals, “*Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand. Anyone who is destined for prison will be taken to prison. Anyone destined to die by the sword will die by the sword. This means that God’s holy people must endure persecution patiently and remain faithful.*” (Revelation 13:9–10)

The assurance, however, is that God’s people will prevail because of Jesus—even through death itself. As a heavenly voice later announces, “*Write this down: Blessed are those who die in the Lord from now on. Yes, says the Spirit, they are blessed indeed, for they will rest from their hard work; for their good deeds follow them!*” (Revelation 14:13)

Death is not the end. Nor is today’s reading the end of the story. There’s more for John to describe. Will we understand everything he depicts? Probably not. What we should know, however, is that God is in control and that our future in Jesus is assured. Let’s focus on that and be encouraged as we do!

December 30
Revelation 15:1-18:24

For God has put a plan into their minds, a plan that will carry out His purposes. They will agree to give their authority to the scarlet beast, and so the words of God will be fulfilled. (Revelation 17:17)

God is in control. His purposes will ultimately be fulfilled. I highlighted this yesterday and am now returning to it today. Despite everything God's spiritual enemy (the dragon) seeks to do, his efforts will fail. The scarlet beast and the great prostitute (the devil's human leadership and defiling influence) will prove unable to defeat God's larger plan. As noted above, their schemes and actions will even become the instrument through which God fulfills His words and promises. Their defiance brings about the culminating events God declared would be—for God is in control.

We should join the chorus of those who proved victorious over the beast. They joyfully exclaim, *"Great and marvelous are Your works, O Lord God, the Almighty. Just and true are Your ways, O King of the nations. Who will not fear You, Lord, and glorify Your name? For You alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before You, for Your righteous deeds have been revealed."* (Revelation 15:3-4)

Today's reading also announces the final demise of the great city of Babylon. It's not coincidental that Babylon reappears prominently. Biblically speaking, the city serves to symbolize God's persistent enemy. It embodies pride, self-indulgence, immorality, and spiritual darkness. It represents the dwelling place of all that is spiritually corrupt. As the angel of God announces, *"She has become a home for demons. She is a hideout for every foul spirit, a hideout for every foul vulture and every foul and dreadful animal. For all the nations have fallen because of the wine of her passionate immorality."* (Revelation 18:2-3)

Babylon symbolizes the worst of humanity's rebellion. What arrogantly began at Babel when the distant descendants of Noah sought to elevate themselves above the Living God (Genesis 11:4) now reaches its conclusion. However, the population of Great Babylon will not merely be scattered. The Lamb will defeat them (Revelation 17:4), and God will eternally judge them. Of course, that's for tomorrow, the culminating passage of our year-long journey.

For today, let's again remind ourselves who is on the throne. Despite all who pretend or suggest otherwise, God is sovereign. His unfolding plan will be fulfilled. Let's take heart concerning our final victory through Jesus, the Lamb.

Come on. Let's anticipate a better day!

December 31 Revelation 19:1-22:21

Praise the LORD! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God. (Revelation 19:1)

Thank you for participating in our yearlong journey through the Bible. We have read and considered a great deal together. As a result, I pray we better understand humanity's story—our story. Let's admit. There are parts we would prefer to ignore or forget. Humankind's sin and rebellion have left some painful, regrettable chapters. Of course, that is likely true of our personal experience as well. Who doesn't wish they could rewrite a chapter or two?

Still, the Bible's greater story is God's redemptive pursuit of sinful humanity. From the very beginning, we observe God's compassion at work. The Creator enters the garden and calls out to Adam and Eve as they hide in shame (Genesis 3:9). Then, as we have read, God slowly works to provide the necessary solution. God provides a Savior who would bear the descendants of Adam's sin and judgment. The world's Savior would be the incarnation of God Himself—Jesus, the Son of God. The Creator did more than enter the garden following Adam's fall. He ultimately enters the brokenness and pain that sin has caused. Jesus even suffers judgment and death because of humanity's rebellion so that He can extend salvation and hope.

Jesus is God's answer to everyone's greatest need—if we only turn to Him. Of course, as today's reading highlights, many refuse to do so and suffer the consequences of their sin. Jesus will either become the instrument of God's salvation or (as the rider of the white horse) the devastating voice of God's judgment. Our response to Him determines which Jesus we will experience. I choose to turn to Him as Savior, and you?

For our final devotion, though, let's close as John's vision also concludes. Let's focus on the future that John portrays for all who trust in Jesus. It's the promise of a garden city, a garden paradise, placed within a new heaven and earth. Contrasted with the destruction of sinful Babylon, John describes the dramatic appearance of the new Jerusalem. His language stretches our imagination. John describes golden streets with walls and gates of precious jewels and stones. The beauty of the promised city exceeds anything we have ever seen or known.

The greater blessing, however, is not the glorious surroundings. It is the announcement concerning God's permanent dwelling. The LORD declares, "*Look, God's home is now among His people! He will live with them, and they will be His people. God Himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.*" (Revelation 21:3-4)

Think about the implications of His announcement. God has completed His work of salvation. Humanity is back in paradise—where men and women can again experience the fullness of His blessing and life. However, the new Jerusalem surpasses Eden, for God establishes His throne and makes His home among His people. The fullness of heart and goodness of life will be greater than anything that has ever been known. Yes, this is our future because of Jesus, our hope! May we fix our gaze upon the promise and live accordingly. Even more, may we also commit to sharing our story. It's a story worth telling!

Devotions written and prepared by Stephen Lowrie
All references unless noted: New Living Translation