

OUR STORY

GOD'S WORK. OUR HOPE.

Chronological Readings

NOVEMBER



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.

November 1

John 18:1-24; Mark 14:32-52; Matthew 26:36-56; Luke 22:39-53

He told them, "My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." (Matthew 26:38)

Today's reading follows Jesus into an unimaginable scene. Jesus, the Son of God, emotionally wrestles with the implications of what is before Him—God's judgment against sin. Jesus prayed earlier for His disciples (John 17: 1-26). Jesus now draws near to the Father on His behalf. As He does, the emotions of His humanity will come fully into view. Jesus confesses to His disciples, *"My soul is crushed with grief to the point of death."* (Matthew 26:38) His words reveal overwhelming anguish, even horror. What is the source of Jesus' distress? It's not a fear of dying. Jesus knows that He will ultimately conquer death. His extreme grief is over the cup He is being asked to drink. Indeed, Jesus humbly prays, *"My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from Me."* (Matthew 26:39) What, then, is the nature of this troubling cup?

First, Jesus, the holy Son of God, is being asked to drink a cup brimming with guilt and shame—the defiling cup of humanity's sin. That will take place as Jesus becomes the sin offering on our behalf. As the Apostle Paul describes, *"For our sake He (God) made Him (Jesus) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him (Jesus) we might become the righteousness of God."* (2 Corinthians 5:21, ESV) I'm not sure that we can grasp the full significance of this. We are far too familiar with both sin and guilt. Yet, in an instant, Jesus will take the whole world's sins upon Himself—the vilest, most disgusting, despicable acts. Jesus will claim them as His own. Imagine your most disgraceful moment, which still causes you to look away in shame. Jesus drank that cup for you. God, the Father, made Jesus, His Son, to be sin for us.

Yet, there's more. The dreaded cup will also include the full measure of God's holy wrath and judgment. Again, this is beyond our comprehension, for this is more than suffering. It is more than physical torment. It is the cup of God's wrath against sin in all its ugliness and filth. Nothing could prepare Jesus for what would assail Him as darkness envelopes the cross—the shock, the alienation. The Son of God would be alienated from the Father for the first time in all eternity. This truly is incomprehensible. It was inconceivable to Him. But the following day, we will hear Jesus cry from the cross, *"Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?"* which means *"My God, my God, why have you abandoned Me?"* (Matthew 27:46) Perhaps, as we think about this, we can better appreciate Jesus's emotional burden. He asks the Father honestly, *"Is there not another way?"* Of course, He knew the answer. To redeem sinful humanity, someone must pay the price. So Jesus prayed again, and again, and again—*"I want Your will to be done, not mine."* (Matthew 26:39)

And our response? Words elude me. How does anyone express a fitting response to this supreme act of love and sacrifice? God forbid we ever doubt the depth of Jesus' commitment and love on our behalf. And my response?

"Lord, I yield my life to You." Anything else seems inadequate. And you?

November 2

Mark 14:53-15:1; Matthew 26:57-27:10; Luke 22:54-71; John 18:25-27

Then the high priest said to Him, "I demand in the name of the living God—tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God." (Matthew 26:64)

Jesus is arrested during the darkness of night. His disciples fearfully scatter, and events rapidly progress toward Jesus' crucifixion. Over the coming hours, Jesus will experience a series of six trials. There will be three religious proceedings—before Annas (John 18:12-14), Caiaphas (Matthew 26:57-68), and the Sanhedrin (Matthew 27:1-2). That will be followed by a series of three civil trials—before Pilate (John 18:28-38), Herod (Luke 23:6-12), and finally again with Pilate (John 18:39-19:6).

During the second religious trial, Caiaphas (the High Priest) pursues a way to condemn Jesus but struggles. Finally, the High Priest presses Jesus to answer under oath, *"I demand in the name of the living God—tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God."* Fully aware of the consequences, Jesus boldly asserts, *"You have said it."* Then He declares, *"And in the future you will see the Son of Man seated in the place of power at God's right hand and coming on the clouds of heaven."* (Matthew 26:63-64) That is all that Caiaphas needed to hear. The High Priest dramatically tears his garment and accuses Jesus of blasphemy. He then leads those gathered to condemn Jesus to death.

"Meanwhile, Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant girl came over and said to him, 'You were one of those with Jesus the Galilean.' But Peter denied it in front of everyone. 'I don't know what you're talking about,' he said." (Matthew 26:69-70) Could there be a more dramatic contrast? Under intense scrutiny, Jesus boldly declares Himself to be God's Son—courageously facing off against those who plot to kill Him. Meanwhile, Simon Peter wilts in the face of a servant girl's accusation and denies any association with Jesus (a total of three times). What contributes to Simon's failure?

Sadly, Simon is full of himself and empty of grace. Considering his actions before his embarrassing denials, Simon is entirely self-reliant. Indeed, he arrogantly claims that he would never abandon Jesus, even if it cost his life (Matthew 26:35). Here is Peter ("the rock"), confident in himself, who crumbles like a castle of sand when threatened by a servant girl in the courtyard. He becomes a living illustration of Proverbs 16:18, *"Pride goes before destruction, and haughtiness before a fall."* Simon is full of himself.

Simon is also empty of grace. What do I mean? I don't mean that Simon fails to be gracious toward others. Instead, full of pride, he is empty of God's grace and activity on his behalf. Think about it. Jesus prepares Himself in the garden to face the challenges before Him. Simon does not. While Jesus prays, Simon sleeps. The man who promises to die with Jesus cannot stay awake an hour and pray with Him (Matthew 26:40). Jesus even warned, *"Keep watch and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation."* (Matthew 26:41) But Simon fails to do so. He neglects to secure the necessary grace and power in prayer to withstand the later accusations. He was full of himself and empty of grace.

And what of us? Whom do we resemble? Do we withstand the hour of testing like Jesus or embarrass ourselves like Simon? Expressed another way, do we humble ourselves as one in need, accepting God's grace and provision by faith? Or are we self-confident in our abilities, too busy or weary to pray, and consequently empty of God's grace and provision? We don't have to answer. Our response will be evident in our actions. May we display that we are empty of ourselves and full of God's grace. Please, Lord, may it be so!

November 3

Mark 15:2-20; Matthew 27:11-31; Luke 22:63-23:25; John 18:28-9:16

Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus replied, "You have said it." (Mark 15:2)

Who is Jesus? Whom do we perceive Him to be? Jesus has already been tried and pronounced guilty by Caiaphas and the religious leaders. They condemn Him to die with an allegation of blasphemy, for Jesus claimed to be the Son of God. However, is it blasphemy if Jesus truly is God's anointed? The religious leaders have reached a decision. They view Jesus as a fraud and a threat. They want Him to suffer and die.

It is Pilate's turn to assess Jesus' identity and potential guilt. The Roman governor sees through the manipulative schemes of the Sanhedrin, but he's unsure what to make of this man. Is Jesus a religious leader or something more—a king? Pilate asks, *"Are you the king of the Jews?"* The whole situation leaves Pilate skeptical of Jesus' guilt, but what to do? Informed that Jesus is Galilean, the Roman governor sends Him to Herod Antipas, who has jurisdiction over Galilee. Maybe Herod can address the matter and relieve Pilate of the responsibility. The Jewish ruler will prove no help. Jesus refuses to respond to Herod, which results in Jesus being thrust again before the wary governor.

Pilate concludes that Jesus is innocent and unworthy of death. He looks instead for a way around the situation. Would flogging suffice? The people cry, "No." How about a choice? Pilate offers the option of releasing a violent insurrectionist (Barabbas) or Jesus (the so-called King of the Jews). The governor campaigns for Jesus' release to no avail. The religious leaders and their organized mob cry out for Barabbas. And what to do with Jesus? The people keep shouting, *"Crucify him! Crucify him!"*

Who is Jesus? Whom do we perceive Him to be? The angry crowd views Jesus as a blasphemer. Pilate regards Jesus as an innocent man but still condemns Him to die. And our conclusion? We have read through the four gospels, bringing us to this critical moment. Who is Jesus, and how do we respond? I have raised this question often through our daily readings because it is the question of the ages. Is Jesus a religious leader, a moral teacher, or a deluded zealot? Who is Jesus? Is He a political king or a redeeming Savior? Our response will be far-reaching in impact—in the present and the eternal future.

Who is Jesus? I confess Him to be the Son of God, who died and rose again so that I might experience forgiveness and life. And you? Yet, let me press us further today. If we confess Jesus to be God's promised Son and Savior, that response should be evident in our lives. Tomorrow, in our reading, we will follow Jesus to the cross to die for our sins. If we believe that is true, we should also follow Jesus with our lives.

Again, I confess Jesus to be the Son of God, who died and rose again so that I might experience forgiveness and life. And you?

November 4

Mark 15:21-41; Matthew 27:32-56; Luke 23:26-49; John 19:17-37

And they brought Jesus to a place called Golgotha (which means "Place of the Skull"). They offered Him wine drugged with myrrh, but He refused it. Then the soldiers nailed Him to the cross. They divided His clothes and threw dice to decide who would get each piece. It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified Him.

A sign announced the charge against Jesus. It read, "The King of the Jews." Two revolutionaries were crucified with Him, one on His right and one on His left. The people passing by shouted abuse, shaking their heads in mockery. "Ha! Look at You now!" they yelled at Him. "You said you were going to destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days. Well then, save Yourself and come down from the cross!" The leading priests and teachers of religious law also mocked Jesus. "He saved others," they scoffed, "but He can't save Himself! Let this Messiah, this King of Israel, come down from the cross so we can see it and believe Him!" Even the men who were crucified with Jesus ridiculed Him.

At noon, darkness fell across the whole land until three o'clock. Then at three o'clock Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which means "My God, My God, why have You abandoned Me?"

Some of the bystanders misunderstood and thought He was calling for the prophet Elijah. One of them ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, holding it up to Him on a reed stick so He could drink. "Wait!" he said. "Let's see whether Elijah comes to take Him down!" Then Jesus uttered another loud cry and breathed His last. And the curtain in the sanctuary of the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. When the Roman officer who stood facing Him saw how He had died, he exclaimed, "This Man truly was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:22-39)

He was despised and rejected— a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on Him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care. Yet it was our weaknesses He carried; it was our sorrows that weighed Him down. And we thought His troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for His own sins! But He was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the LORD laid on Him the sins of us all. (Isaiah 53:3-6)

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29)

I offer no commentary today. Think about what you have read. Pray about what is described. Respond to Jesus appropriately.

November 5

Mark 15:42-16:11; Matthew 27:57-28:15; Luke 23:50-24:12; John 19:38-20:18

But very early on Sunday morning the women went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. They found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. So they went in, but they didn't find the body of the Lord Jesus. As they stood there puzzled, two men suddenly appeared to them, clothed in dazzling robes. The women were terrified and bowed with their faces to the ground. Then the men asked, "Why are you looking among the dead for someone who is alive? He isn't here! He is risen from the dead!" (Luke 24:1-6)

What sets Christianity apart from the world's religions? One would rightly say it's the message of Jesus. Salvation is not the result of man's work but God's. Indeed, Christianity teaches that God (in the person of Jesus, His Son) entered the brokenness of the human experience so He might rescue humanity from the consequences of sin. Jesus came to do what no other descendant of Adam could. The Son of God lived without sin so He might become the sin offering on our behalf. As the Apostle John describes, *"He Himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not only our sins but the sins of all the world."* (1 John 2:2) Because of Jesus, salvation can be received by faith as a gift. It is unmerited and forever alters one's relationship with God. John's gospel also declares, *"But to all who believed Him (Jesus) and accepted Him, He gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God."* (John 1:12-13)

Again, what sets Christianity apart? It is the good news of Jesus Christ. However, we should admit that no good news exists if Jesus did not conquer death. His resurrection is essential. Why so? Jesus' victory proves He is who He claimed to be. Think about it. Jesus declared Himself to be God incarnate and that His words are the source of life and hope (John 14:1-11). Anyone could make such claims. Many religious leaders have uniquely elevated themselves to attract attention and followers. Yet, they have all died and remained in their grave or tomb. Though their teachings may persist, their mortality is not in dispute. They were mortal as we are, limited as we are, and, yes, sinners as we are. Yet, Jesus claims to be more, and the testimony surrounding His resurrection attests He is. As the Apostle Paul affirms, *"He was shown to be the Son of God when He was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit. He is Jesus Christ our Lord."* (Romans 1:4)

Of course, skeptics would argue that the biblical witness is fraudulent. They suggest that the early disciples concocted the resurrection account to perpetuate a lie—that none of their testimony is true. But these same disciples (history tells us) would later die for their alleged fabrication, which raises a question. Who would die for a lie? Maybe one deluded soul might, but one eyewitness to the resurrection after the next? No. Something historically happened that radically affected a group of people, resulting in the birth of Christianity. And what was that something? Today's reading highlights the motivating factor—Jesus, the Son of God, who died for sinners, lives! And our response?

My heart is stirred to look again at Jesus. I do not follow a religious leader or adhere to impersonal religious beliefs. My focus is on the person of Jesus, the Son of God. My hope rests upon the truth of who He is and the promises He extends. Jesus declares to a grieving family, *"I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in Me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in Me and believes in Me will never ever die."* (John 11:25-26) Jesus then asks, *"Do you believe this?"* I want to be on the record, "I believe." I believe Jesus is the Son of God who died for my sins and now lives victoriously. I believe in Jesus, and my life will never be the same. And your response?

November 6

Luke 24:13-49; Mark 16:12-18; John 20:19-21:25; Matthew 28:16-20

At dawn Jesus was standing on the beach, but the disciples couldn't see who He was. He called out, "Fellows, have you caught any fish?" "No," they replied. Then He said, "Throw out your net on the right-hand side of the boat, and you'll get some!" So they did, and they couldn't haul in the net because there were so many fish in it. Then the disciple Jesus loved said to Peter, "It's the Lord!" (John 21:4-7)

Jesus, the Son of God, conquered death. He died and rose again, so whoever believed in Him would be assured eternal life with God. May our hearts rejoice. Jesus has risen! Today's reading highlights a series of post-resurrection appearances that Jesus makes among His disciples. Each illustrates that Jesus is alive. He visits with two down-hearted followers on the road to Emmaus. Jesus opens their eyes to the testimony of the prophets. More significantly, Jesus opens their eyes to the truth of His identity as He breaks bread with them. They return to Jerusalem to declare, *"The Lord has risen!"*

Yes. Jesus, in a variety of ways, demonstrates that He truly is alive. Jesus unexpectedly appeared to the disciples on that first Easter, still hiding behind locked doors. Jesus shows them the wounds in His hands and side. Thomas, however, remains skeptical. He openly expresses doubt since he was not present at Jesus' appearance. He states, *"I won't believe it unless I see the nail wounds in His hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in His side."* (John 20:25) I appreciate Thomas' honesty. Would we have thought otherwise? Normal people do not conquer death. Of course, Jesus is more than a man. One week later, Jesus appears and says to Thomas, *"Put your finger here, and look at My hands. Put your hand into the wound in My side. Don't be faithless any longer. Believe!"* (John 20:27) Thomas exclaims, *"My Lord, and God."* Indeed, *Jesus is our Lord and God!*

One of my favorite resurrection accounts is Jesus' appearance to the disciples as they fish on the sea of Galilee. It is like they have come full circle. Jesus originally called Simon, Andrew, James, and John to be His disciples following an earlier miracle on the water. Here they are again—fishing. And here Jesus is again—revealing Himself to be the Son of God. As Peter becomes aware that Jesus is on the shore, he promptly dives into the water and swims to join Him. What is racing through Peter's mind? Though Jesus had previously appeared to Peter, he likely still struggles with the shame of his three denials.

It's Jesus who initiates the conversation. And it's Jesus who tenderly encourages Peter, even as He would lovingly reassure us. Jesus asks Peter, *"Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?"* Jesus' question must have initially stung. Peter claimed that if all the disciples abandoned Jesus, he never would. Peter asserted that he would die if necessary. Peter's failure proved otherwise. Meekly, Simon responds, *"Yes, Lord, you know I love you."* Jesus presses further and asks again, *"Simon, do you love me?"* And then a third time, *"Simon, do you love me?"* Why the repetition? The parallel to Simon's denials is obvious. Yet, with each question and each of Simon's confessions of love, Jesus calls Simon Peter back to service. *"Feed My lambs. Take care of My sheep. Feed My sheep."*

Here's the point: Simon Peter's failure did not disqualify him from service, and (by the way) nor does your stumbling disqualify you. The forgiveness and compassion of the Lord restore those who falter. It is worth noting that Jesus didn't ask Simon to try harder, for it's not about one's effort. Jesus asks Peter to focus again on the relationship that can strengthen and empower Him. *"Simon,"* Jesus asks, *"do you love me?"* He would ask the same of us. Not to provoke guilt but to call us back into relationship and service. The resurrected Son of God desires for us to know Him, and knowing Him to love Him, and loving Him to follow Him. So, do we love Him? Simon confessed His love on that memorable day. Maybe it would lift our hearts to voice the same. *"Lord Jesus, I love you."*

November 7

Mark 16:19-20; Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:1-2:47

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)

The resurrected Jesus gathers with His disciples one final time before He ascends. As one might imagine, the disciples focus on when Jesus will establish His earthly kingdom. Jesus' attention, however, remains on the mission at hand. Jesus is ascending on high so He can facilitate a continuing work through His disciples. In a spiritual sense, His followers (the Church) will become His spiritual body upon the earth (1 Corinthians 12:27). Before His departure, Jesus lays out the general plan.

First, Jesus reminds His followers they will receive a power greater than themselves. As Jesus explained on the night of His arrest, the Father would send them the gift of His Holy Spirit to dwell within them (John 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; 16:13). His presence would become a part of their lives to comfort, guide, and strengthen them, but also, so they could fulfill the Father's larger plan and work. God's Spirit would prove sufficient for their task ahead.

Yet, Jesus also underscores their mission. The disciples would be the recipients of God's presence to become effective witnesses on Jesus' behalf. The promise of His power was for more than personal benefit. As Jesus previously explained, *“But I will send you the Advocate—the Spirit of truth. He will come to you from the Father and will testify all about Me. And you must also testify about Me because you have been with Me from the beginning of My ministry.” (John 15:26–27)* They are to be His witnesses.

Again, as Jesus spells it out, *“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)* Jesus could not be clearer. His disciples must not keep what they know a secret. They are to testify to what they have experienced in Jesus. His followers are to share the hope that they have found in Him. They are to explain how Jesus died and rose again as the Son of God so that anyone who believes in Him can experience forgiveness and life. They are to be His witnesses! Of course, ten days later, the disciples experience this firsthand (Acts 2). They dramatically receive the Holy Spirit and immediately share the good news within Jerusalem—resulting in 3000 new believers in Jesus. And as we read on, they will also become witnesses in Judea, Samaria, and, yes, to the ends of the earth. They become a living testimony to Jesus' words. The world has never been the same.

And what of us? We are given the presence of God's Spirit as we believe in Jesus. The Apostle Paul explains, *“And when you believed in Christ, He identified you as His own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom He promised long ago.” (Ephesians 1:13)* Like the first generation of followers, we have received power from on high. The question is, “Are we continuing the mission?” We have been given the same gift of God's Spirit so we might bear witness to the One who has changed our lives. Are we doing so? Do note: you don't have to be a biblical expert or scholar. Instead, share what you know if you have experienced forgiveness and life in Jesus. More directly, point those around you to the One you know—Jesus. Become a witness to Him in the truest sense of the word. Don't make it more complicated than it is. And more importantly, don't forget that you have a power greater than yourself at work. Yield yourself to the Lord daily. Pray by name for those around you. And, as God enables, point someone to Jesus. Ask God for the opportunity to do so—even today!

November 8

Acts 3:1-5:42

Peter said, "I don't have any silver or gold for you. But I'll give you what I have. In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, get up and walk!" (Acts 3:6)

Jesus commands His disciples to be His witnesses and powerful witnesses they become. They boldly proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem. Their message is consistently the same. Jesus died and rose again to impart forgiveness and life to all who believed. God even enables Peter to heal a lame man begging in the Temple. Instead of contributing a financial gift, Peter commands the man to get up in the name of Jesus. As Peter helps the man to his feet, he is instantly healed. The power of Jesus Christ is displayed.

A crowd soon forms in response to the miracle. Peter promptly points the people to Jesus. He declares, *"You killed the author of life, but God raised Him from the dead. And we are witnesses of this fact!" (Acts 3:1)* What a statement, but it's true. They put to death the *"author of life,"* but God raised Him from the dead so that He might extend the gift of life. Peter appeals, *"Repent of your sins and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped away." (Acts 3:19)* Peter's message is compelling. Many who heard the message believed, and the number of believers in Jesus increased to 5,000 (Acts 4:4).

However, not everyone is pleased. While interacting with the crowd, the religious leaders soon confront Peter and John. They are brought to the Sanhedrin the following day to explain their actions. Peter is fearless. Filled with the Holy Spirit, he declares, *"Rulers and elders of our people, are we being questioned today because we've done a good deed for a crippled man? Do you want to know how he was healed? Let me clearly state to all of you and to all the people of Israel that he was healed by the powerful name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, the man you crucified but whom God raised from the dead. For Jesus is the one referred to in the Scriptures, where it says, 'The stone that you builders rejected has now become the cornerstone.' There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:8-12)*

Peter and John's boldness amazes the council. Where did they acquire their biblical insight and understanding? They have recognizably been with Jesus, so the religious leaders attempt to intimidate them into silence. And Peter and John's response? *"Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than Him? We cannot stop telling about everything we have seen and heard." (Acts 4:19-20)* The conflict now begins, which will escalate into violent persecution. Jesus' witnesses would live up to the meaning of the word. The Greek term for witness is *"mártus,"* from which we obtain the English word "martyr." Yet, even in their language, the early disciples recognized that being a witness might require the ultimate sacrifice.

And what of us? Are we bold in our witness or intimidated into silence? If silent, what is it we fear? Are we afraid of rejection or loss of reputation? Is there a threat of physical loss or harm? What is it that prevents us from pointing others to Jesus? Let's be honest in our assessment. Consider also what made the difference with the early disciples. *"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)* The key is God's Spirit. They allowed God's Spirit to work through them in ways that moved them beyond their fear. Perhaps we should seek to do the same. Let's yield ourselves anew to the Spirit's presence and work. May we also focus on Jesus and His promise of life. With our eyes on Jesus, let's step beyond our fear and anticipate God's activity as we do. May Jesus be lifted up!

November 9

Acts 6:1–8:1a

But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. (Acts 6:1)

The rapid growth of the Jerusalem church results in new challenges—first internally. Discontent arose over the distribution of food among certain widows within the congregation. The Greek-speaking widows were not receiving the same attention as their Hebrew-speaking counterparts. The inequity generated division among the members, jeopardizing the congregation's continued effectiveness. This issue illustrates how interpersonal challenges can appear even when God is dramatically at work. Loving God, serving God, and following God's leadership doesn't mean internal struggles will not arise. The local church will always have its share of potential problems. The question is, "When the problems arise, how will the congregation respond?" The Jerusalem church models an instructive approach.

Instead of ignoring the problem, the congregation appoints a group of individuals to address the concern. They chose seven respected leaders who could distribute the widow's support more effectively. Not coincidentally, the seven selected reflect Greek-sounding names. In other words, the congregation appoints seven spiritually mature individuals with a natural affinity toward those who had been neglected. They represent God's solution to a problem that threatens their future success—seven "problem-solvers" who would serve on the congregation's behalf. Many believe these initial seven are the first to serve as deacons within the expanding Church. The term "*deacon*" literally means servant in the Greek language. Here, we have an early example of these servant-leaders vital role. And what results? "*So God's message continued to spread. The number of believers greatly increased in Jerusalem, and many of the Jewish priests were converted, too.*" (Acts 6:7)

Yet, the expanding Church also experiences challenges externally—highlighted by the death of Stephen. We are introduced to Stephen as one of the seven selected to address the congregation's internal struggle. However, Stephen is likewise a bold witness outside the Church, provoking angry opposition. Some falsely accuse Stephen of blasphemy, resulting in his arrest and trial. Will Stephen be intimidated into silence? Quite the opposite! In a thoughtful, scripturally insightful way, Stephen explains how Jesus is the culmination of God's promises and rebukes the council that had condemned Jesus to die. He declares, "*You stubborn people! You are heathen at heart and deaf to the truth. Must you forever resist the Holy Spirit? That's what your ancestors did, and so do you! Name one prophet your ancestors didn't persecute! They even killed the ones who predicted the coming of the Righteous One—the Messiah whom you betrayed and murdered.*" (Acts 7:51–52)

Stephen's words enrage those gathered, but then he adds, "*Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing in the place of honor at God's right hand!*" (Acts 7:56) That was all the Sanhedrin could take. They rush Stephen, drag him outside the city, and violently stone him to death. Yet, even then, Stephen reflects Jesus' influence. He prays, "*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,*" and then he shouts, "*Lord, don't charge them with this sin!*" (Acts 7:59–60) And with that, the Church's first martyr dies.

And our response? First, let's be a part of God's solution when the Church struggles within, not part of the problem. May we step forward in service in ways that enable the congregation to overcome the challenge—facilitating the Church's progress and success. Second, may the Lord raise up "Stephens" in our day who will boldly proclaim the good news of Jesus to an increasingly hostile world. May we also reflect Jesus' influence when mistreated and wronged. Stephen stood up for the Lord in the face of cruel opposition. And let it be noted that Jesus stood up for Stephen. I pray we live in a way that motivates Jesus to do the same for us. May God's Spirit empower us in that direction!

November 10

Acts 8-9

A great wave of persecution began that day, sweeping over the Church in Jerusalem; and all the believers except the apostles were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria. (Acts 8:1)

Today's reading highlights a series of notable salvation stories—starting with a significant number of faith responses in the city of Samaria. Persecution against the Church is increasing. Many early believers were forced out of Jerusalem as a result. Philip, for example, travels to Samaria and begins openly sharing the good news of Jesus. He refuses to allow the threat of persecution to silence his testimony. The Samaritans turn to Jesus in great numbers and are baptized. Jesus' pronouncement concerning His followers is being fulfilled. *“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)*

The Jerusalem church sent Peter and John to observe and confirm God's work among the Samaritans. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not to be limited to Judea alone. Jesus' message of hope will ultimately touch the world. Jesus foreshadowed this when He interacted with the Samaritan woman at Sychar (John 4:1-42). She, too, responded to Jesus, resulting in the entire village discovering the good news of Jesus. They later exclaim, *“Now we know that He is indeed the Savior of the world.” (John 4:42)*

Despite his ministry success in Samaria, an angel of the Lord directs Philip south along a desert road to Gaza, leading to another noteworthy conversion. Philip observes an Ethiopian man reading aloud from the book of Isaiah. God's Spirit prompts him to engage the man in discussion. Philip obeys. He connects the prophecies of scripture with the message of Jesus, and the man's heart is affected. The Ethiopian official responds in faith and is promptly baptized. A seemingly random encounter results in a new believer and a new witness to the gospel—now to Ethiopia. We should marvel at how God works and learn (like Philip) to obey the Spirit's prompting. We never know what God is in the process of doing, which brings us to our final significant faith story.

Saul violently opposes Jesus' followers. He's doing everything he can to halt the spread of their message. They are, from his perspective, blasphemers who deserve to suffer and die for their claims concerning Jesus. However, on the road to Damascus, Saul's perspective radically changes. He encounters the resurrected Jesus. Indeed, Jesus confronts his angry opponent personally. *“Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting Me?” “Who are you, lord?” Saul asked. And the voice replied, “I am Jesus, the One you are persecuting.” (Acts 9:3-5)* Ironically, Jesus temporarily blinds Saul so he might spiritually see. And see, he does. A new voice for the gospel of Jesus Christ will soon be heard. Jesus' future missionary to the Gentiles will be put into service.

We'll continue to follow Saul's transformation moving ahead. For now, think about what we have observed from today's reading. People respond to Jesus when given an opportunity. They turn to Him in faith when they recognize the truth of who He is. Admittedly, not everyone will accept Jesus as their Savior. We know that is true. Even so, many individuals will choose to believe if only given the opportunity. May we learn from Philip's example and provide them with the possibility. Saul (better known as Paul) later expresses it this way: *“How can they call on Him to save them unless they believe in Him? And how can they believe in Him if they have never heard about Him? And how can they hear about Him unless someone tells them?” (Romans 10:14)* Do we get the point? Will we do something about it? I pray we will reflect Philip's availability and boldness to share our hope in Jesus with someone near. Will you join me?

November 11

Acts 10:1-12:5

Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean. (Acts 10:15)

We take another significant step forward in the work of the gospel in today's reading. Jesus announced that His disciples would receive power and be His witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and ultimately, to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). We focused yesterday on Philip's ministry among the Samaritans. Our attention today shifts to Simon Peter as he travels to Caesarea to visit the home of a Roman officer. It is a pivotal moment for both Peter and the early Church. The good news of Jesus Christ will be deliberately shared with a Gentile family. Such an important step would require God's direct coordination.

The story begins with the Roman officer, Cornelius, receiving an angelic visitor. God sends His messenger to instruct the god-fearing Cornelius to summon a man named Simon Peter to his home. As unusual as the announcement may have seemed, the officer promptly obeys. He directs a soldier and two household servants to travel to Joppa to extend his invitation. As Cornelius' representatives approach their destination, God prepares Simon Peter for the unlikely invitation. God does so through a series of three visions. In each, Peter is stretched beyond his comfort zone. God commands him to kill and eat a collection of animals, birds, and reptiles that Simon perceives as unclean. However, God's message could not be clearer. The Lord declares, *"Do not call something unclean if God has made it clean."* (Acts 10:15)

As Simon Peter reflects upon his experience, the men sent by Cornelius arrive at the residence. God's timing is perfect. Indeed, God's Spirit directs Peter (even before receiving the invitation) to travel with the three previously unknown individuals. God is arranging a meeting that would impact the future thinking of the Church. Peter travels to Caesarea and arrives at Cornelius' home with some Christian brothers he had invited to join him. God's visionary lesson remains fresh in Peter's heart. He explains to Cornelius, *"You know it is against our laws for a Jewish man to enter a Gentile home like this or to associate with you. But God has shown me that I should no longer think of anyone as impure or unclean. So I came without objection as soon as I was sent for."* (Acts 10:28-29)

What results from the orchestrated meeting? Cornelius and those gathered respond by faith to the gospel—a Gentile household become followers of Jesus Christ. It is a divinely appointed meeting with purpose and design. Dramatically, God teaches the early Church that Jesus' message is for all people—for Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles. That's especially relevant to me, a Gentile follower of Jesus Christ.

And what is the lesson for us? Let's marvel over God's direct involvement in sharing the good news of Jesus. He's not a spectator to the gospel enterprise. God is ever seeking to bring people together so that the message of Jesus Christ can affect a person's heart. He positions Philip at the right place and time to share with an Ethiopian official. And now he orchestrates another unlikely encounter for all to see. A vital element in both accounts is Philip and Peter's willingness to follow God's lead. Are we willing to do the same? Will we move beyond our comfort zone to become God's messenger of hope? Will we boldly share what we know about Jesus with another?

God is still working today to bring divine appointments together. Will we follow His lead? Will you?

November 12

Acts 12:6-14:20

Meanwhile, the word of God continued to spread, and there were many new believers. (Acts 12:24)

Persecution against Jesus' followers continues to intensify. Herod Agrippa executes James (John's brother) by the sword and then, motivated by the popularity of his actions, arrests and imprisons Peter. It is becoming increasingly difficult for the Jerusalem church. Even so, the congregation remains spiritually vibrant and resilient. God miraculously delivers Peter, and the church's testimony concerning Jesus resounds. Indeed, as stated above, *"the word of God continued to spread, and there were many new believers."* (Acts 12:24) Sometimes the light of the gospel shines its brightest when the circumstances are their darkest.

The good news of Jesus also continues to spread abroad. The leaders in Antioch prayerfully set Barnabas and Saul (Paul) apart as the first missionary team. John Mark joins the pair as they sail from Syria to the island of Cyprus. The message of Jesus Christ is on the move. Though John Mark eventually abandoned the effort, Barnabas and Paul pressed faithfully forward. They courageously share their abounding hope in Jesus from Cyprus to Pamphylia to Galatia. Their faith and determination should inspire us all.

What can we learn from the team's example? First, Barnabas and Paul adjust to the changing conditions. They focus initially on the Jewish population but soon recognize the dynamic of God's activity among the Gentiles. Consequently, they invest their time and energy where God is working. The team's discernment and flexibility are crucial to their success.

Second, Barnabas does not allow his ego to hinder God's continuing work. How so? Early in their journey, Luke lists the team as Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13:3, 7). Something changes, however, as they travel from Cyprus to Pamphylia. Paul begins to be listed first (Acts 13:13, 43, 46, 50). The change in order likely suggests a shift in leadership and prominence on Paul's part. Some think that John Mark may have defected due to the change. Of course, we do not know Mark's motivation for sure. What should be noted is that Barnabas remains focused on the mission. He refuses to allow a role change to interfere with their collaborative effort. Barnabas' example should instruct us all.

Finally, the first missionary journey reminds us that doing God's work does not insulate a person from hardship. It may potentially move God's servants toward it. Paul and Barnabas are at the center of God's activity yet encounter tests and challenges. Notably, Paul is stoned and left for dead at Lystra (Acts 14:19-20). Remarkably, he gets up and seemingly continues his work undeterred. Neither Paul nor Barnabas allows the struggles they endure to dissuade them from the mission. Instead, they view such sacrifices as worthy of the One they follow.

So, what might we learn? There's much to consider. How's our flexibility for the sake of the gospel? Do we allow our ego to become a hindrance to God's work? And how often have we quit a task because it became too difficult? May God encourage our hearts through Barnabas and Paul's example and move us toward His service in ways that make a difference.

November 13

Acts 14:21-28; Galatians 1:1-3:1-23

After preaching the Good News in Derbe and making many disciples, Paul and Barnabas returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch of Pisidia, where they strengthened the believers. (Acts 14:21–22)

Paul and Barnabas retrace much of their earlier path as their initial mission endeavor moves toward an end. They seek to strengthen the believers they left behind. Observing God still at work in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch of Pisidia must have been spiritually encouraging. They also appoint spiritual leaders within each congregation. The future health of the churches depends on mature leadership to navigate the challenges ahead. However, Paul and Barnabas ultimately commit the greater work to the Lord. As Luke describes, *“With prayer and fasting, they turned the elders over to the care of the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.” (Acts 14:23)*

Eventually, the mission team returned to their sending church—the congregation in Antioch. Three years have passed since the Antioch leaders set Barnabas and Paul apart for their missionary enterprise. They were three years of personal challenges, trials, and significant successes. New congregations have been planted on the Island of Cyprus, with additional churches in the provinces of Pamphylia and Galatia. The saving power of Jesus Christ has been witnessed again and again. Barnabas and Paul report everything God achieved, notably how the Lord opened a door of ministry to the Gentiles.

While in Antioch, Paul likely wrote his letter of support to the congregations in Galatia (Book of Galatians). The apostle may have received word that a group of false teachers had begun to mislead the new churches. These so-called teachers have been promoting a "gospel" contrary to Paul's message. Jewish in background, the false teachers claim that one's faith in Jesus as Savior is insufficient without embracing Judaism's practices (circumcision, food restrictions, etc.). Paul's response could not be more pointed. He writes, *“I am shocked that you are turning away so soon from God, who called you to Himself through the loving mercy of Christ. You are following a different way that pretends to be the Good News but is not the Good News at all. You are being fooled by those who deliberately twist the truth concerning Christ.” (Galatians 1:6–7)* Paul also warns, *“Let God's curse fall on anyone, including us or even an angel from heaven, who preaches a different kind of Good News than the one we preached to you.” (Galatians 1:8)*

The stakes could not be higher. Salvation is by faith in Jesus alone. To suggest otherwise diminishes Jesus and places our attention unhealthily upon ourselves. If we could save ourselves through the law, then Jesus need not have come. But our best efforts are grossly inadequate. Salvation is not Jesus plus something else. Paul explains, *“We know that a person is made right with God by faith in Jesus Christ, not by obeying the law. And we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be made right with God because of our faith in Christ, not because we have obeyed the law. For no one will ever be made right with God by obeying the law.” (Galatians 2:16)*

Is that a truth that we also need to keep before us? It is easy to take our eyes off Jesus and redirect our attention to something else. Paul writes the book of Galatians so that we might keep our eyes of faith on the One who saves—Jesus. Will we do so? Will we help others to do the same?

November 14
Galatians 3:24–6:18; Acts 15:1-21

While Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch of Syria, some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the believers: "Unless you are circumcised as required by the law of Moses, you cannot be saved." Paul and Barnabas disagreed with them, arguing vehemently. Finally, the church decided to send Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem, accompanied by some local believers, to talk to the apostles and elders about this question. (Acts 15:1–2)

How is a sinner saved—made right with a holy God? Is it a result of religious effort or ritual? Or is it a result of God's redemptive work on a person's behalf? Jesus answers the question in His conversation with the religious leader, Nicodemus. He explains, *"For this is how God loved the world: He gave His one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent His Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through Him."* (John 3:16–17) Of course, Paul expresses the same message during his first missionary journey. In Antioch of Pisidia, the apostle proclaims, *"Brothers, listen! We are here to proclaim that through this man Jesus there is forgiveness for your sins. Everyone who believes in Him is made right in God's sight—something the law of Moses could never do."* (Acts 13:38–39)

Disturbingly, as noted yesterday, false teachers began to distort the good news of Jesus Christ. They promoted a way of salvation in Jesus that demanded conformity to the Old Testament law. In other words, faith in Jesus is not enough. Paul aggressively combats this heresy in his letter to the Galatian churches. Paul elaborates regarding the law, *"The law was our guardian until Christ came; it protected us until we could be made right with God through faith. And now that the way of faith has come, we no longer need the law as our guardian. For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus."* (Galatians 3:24–26)

Does that allow for moral indifference or lawlessness among Jesus' followers? Certainly not! Paul pleads, *"Don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love."* (Galatians 5:13) Paul later adds, *"Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to His cross and crucified them there."* (Galatians 5:24) Paul's point is this: salvation is undeniably based upon one's faith in Jesus. However, the heart (where faith resides) should noticeably reflect Jesus' influence. We will observe this lesson consistently in Paul's future letters.

So, what can we conclude from today's reading? Let's be clear. Salvation is by faith in Jesus alone. We must resist anyone or anything that would take our eyes off Jesus, our Savior. This issue was so important that leaders gathered in Jerusalem to address it. Paul, describing the Gentile response to Jesus, explains, *"He (God) made no distinction between us and them, for He cleansed their hearts through faith. So why are you now challenging God by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus."* (Acts 15:9–11) The leaders of the Church agree. Though they request Gentile believers to display an appropriate sensitivity to Jewish believers, the gospel's message is settled. Salvation is by faith in Jesus alone.

May it remain settled in our hearts as well. Indeed, may Jesus be praised!

November 15

Acts 15:22-17:15

After some time Paul said to Barnabas, "Let's go back and visit each city where we previously preached the word of the Lord, to see how the new believers are doing." Barnabas agreed and wanted to take along John Mark. But Paul disagreed strongly, since John Mark had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in their work. Their disagreement was so sharp that they separated. (Acts 15:36-39)

With the questions surrounding the gospel resolved, Paul and Barnabas discuss returning to the cities they had previously visited. Their discussion, however, results in a sharp disagreement. Barnabas desires John Mark, his cousin, to join them again in their efforts. Paul is firmly opposed to the idea. We do not know what contributed to John Mark's early departure during their first missionary endeavor. Paul is adamant that the young man should not participate in the second. Both Paul and Barnabas are immovable in their opinion, resulting in two teams being formed instead of one. Barnabas and John Mark sail for Cyprus. Paul and Silas travel throughout Syria and Cilicia.

What are we to conclude from the disagreement? Is one of them right and the other wrong? Regrettably, sometimes we view all decisions in those terms when both positions likely possess some strengths and weaknesses. Barnabas is determined to pour further into John Mark, while Paul is convinced that the path ahead requires greater stability than what John Mark displayed. The outcome results in God working in both directions. We will continue to follow Paul and Silas' efforts in the readings ahead. Yet, we should likewise appreciate the success of Barnabas' decision. The time he invests in John Mark is of value. Indeed, his younger protégé will become the writer of the Gospel of Mark. That's right. John Mark will record a testimony concerning Jesus that has touched the world for generations. Moreover, the skeptical Paul will later speak of John Mark in commendable terms. In his letter to Philemon, Paul describes him as a "co-worker." (*Philemon 24*) Then, Paul writes to Timothy in his final letter and asks, "Bring Mark with you when you come, for he will be helpful to me in my ministry" (2 Timothy 4:11). Yes. We should consider both Barnabas and Paul successful in their efforts, though their difference of opinion led them down different paths.

And what of Paul and Silas? They follow God's leadership into a whole new area--Macedonia. We should admire their courage. For all practical purposes, they are leaving any potential support system behind. They place their confidence in God's call and will trust in God's provision. It should again be noted that Paul will face consistent and sometimes severe opposition. For example, their first stop in Philippi would result in a church being formed, but Paul and Silas would also be beaten and imprisoned. That combination characterizes much of today's reading.

What do we take away from today's reading? First, differences of opinion can sometimes be a blessing instead of a hindrance. Keep this in mind. There's no indication that Paul and Barnabas allowed their disagreement to become personal, fracturing their relationship. Paul's later commendation of John Mark would suggest his appreciation of God's work through his former associate, Barnabas. May God help us in Christian love to agree to disagree and still work for the cause of Christ in ways that He would lead. Second, we should also remind ourselves that we can be in the center of God's will and still encounter significant difficulty. Don't make the mistake of assuming that following God's leadership will guarantee a comfortable path. Honestly, the opposite is more likely. Even so, take heart. Walking in God's will ensures an outpouring of God's grace and provision—and, on top of that, a full heart. Who knows? Your heart may overflow with praise in the most unlikely places. I pray God will encourage us with both lessons today and lead us forward.

November 16

Acts 17:16-18:3; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5:11

Then they took him to the high council of the city. "Come and tell us about this new teaching," they said." (Acts 17:19)

Paul's second missionary journey reaches the city of Athens, and he's invited to address the city's high council. Earlier discussions about Jesus had aroused curiosity among many. Paul then seeks to meet the listeners where they are in their beliefs and move them to the truth of Jesus Christ. The apostle again models the necessity of discernment (knowing your crowd) and a thoughtful proclamation of the truth. In other words, though the message of Jesus does not change, how the gospel is communicated very well may.

In his appeal, Paul alludes to the Greek altar "To an Unknown God" and explains how the "unknown God" can now be known and experienced. Paul boldly speaks about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and how He is God's remedy for the coming day of judgment. Some laugh at Paul's message, others seek to understand better, and some respond sincerely in faith. Paul's courage to speak out creates the opportunity for God to work. May we keep that in mind. People will never turn to Jesus if no one will speak up about Him. Let's commit ourselves to be messengers of His good news.

Paul eventually leaves Athens and travels to Corinth. Timothy, however, is sent back to Thessalonica to check on the developing congregation. Though Paul focuses on a new work in Corinth, he remains concerned for the Thessalonian believers. Indeed, upon Timothy's arrival in Corinth, Paul writes a helpful letter to the Thessalonians. His letter gives us a glimpse into the apostle's heart and further insight into a church birthed out of controversy and persecution. Paul's time in Thessalonica had been limited due to the volatile opposition. Yet, the apostle's commitment to the believers remains.

What do we learn from Paul's letter? His epistle offers practical insight into the Christian life and should be considered as relevant to us as it was to the Thessalonian church. May we approach Paul's letter prayerfully and act upon his words appropriately. Paul's words also provide an example that we should follow. How so? He exemplifies how we might help and encourage new believers. Look again at the letter. What do we find? We observe Paul praying, affirming, reminding, and clarifying.

PRAYING—the apostle indicates that he and the missionary team constantly pray on the Thessalonians' behalf (1 Thessalonians 1:2). Paul understands that prayer is crucial because new and mature Christians depend on God's daily grace and power. Paul prays. **AFFIRMING**—Paul recognizes and affirms the good that is taking place within the church despite its hardship (1 Thessalonians 1:3-10). New believers need to hear when they are moving in the right direction. Paul affirms. **REMINDING**—Paul also seeks to remind the new believers of God's wisdom and guidance concerning their daily lives (1 Thessalonians 4:1-12). His words are morally practical and to the point. He also understands that they must hear his instructions more than once. Paul reminds. **CLARIFYING**—Paul likewise explains what is unclear or misunderstood (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). Sometimes, repetition is not enough. New believers may require additional instruction and clarification. Paul clarifies.

Let's learn then from Paul's words and example. May we point others to Jesus—discerning where people are and communicating the truth appropriately. Let's also take Paul's Thessalonian letter to heart and seek to emulate his approach toward new believers. As we do, we will grow in grace as we live out God's wisdom. But we will also help others to do the same as we pray, affirm, remind, and clarify. What do you think? Will you join me?

November 17

1 Thessalonians 5:12-28; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-3:18; Acts 18:4-23

Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again. God will make this happen, for He who calls you is faithful. (1 Thessalonians 5:23–24)

Yesterday, I highlighted Paul's approach to the new believers in Thessalonica. They responded to Jesus in a hostile environment, so Paul writes to strengthen and reassure them. As I noted, Paul prays on their behalf, affirms their actions, reminds them of his teaching, and clarifies what should be understood. We should probably do the same as we encourage new believers around us. Even if you view yourself as relatively new in following Jesus, you can adopt the same approach in supporting someone you may know.

As Paul moves to the conclusion of his letter, he voices a benediction that should encourage our hearts. He prays for the Thessalonians in a way that we should also pray. Specifically, Paul asks the God of peace to make them holy in every way. The idea of "holiness" is to be set apart for God's purposes. It suggests more than a godly morality (though that is implied). It emphasizes one's higher purpose in life—to reflect Jesus in what we do, say, and become. And Paul's prayer? He prays that the God of peace Himself would bring this about. Indeed, his language for God's activity is emphatic. It is not insinuating that we are entirely passive in the process, for we are not. However, it does remind us that God is not a spectator to this work of grace. God is directly involved.

The benediction also emphasizes how God's work should affect the whole of who we are—spirit, soul, and body. Our transformation will falter when we offer a limited aspect of ourselves. Instead, we should petition the God of peace to impact every facet from the inside out. May we seek that for ourselves even as we would intercede for others. Of course, the goal is that God's sanctifying work would make us blameless, beyond scrutiny. That doesn't imply that we can be perfect. None of us will experience perfection on this side of eternity. Nevertheless, we should request and pursue a Christ-likeness that withstands the examination of a skeptical, unbelieving world. O, that God Himself would perform such necessary work.

The encouraging news is that God desires to answer this prayer. As the apostle declares, *"God will make this happen, for He who calls you is faithful."* (1 Thessalonians 5:24) Every time I read Paul's words, my heart is strengthened. The God who rescues us in Jesus and calls us to His holy purpose is committed to completing His transforming work in our lives. Paul returns to this theme in his second letter to the Thessalonians. He writes, *"So we keep on praying for you, asking our God to enable you to live a life worthy of His call. May He give you the power to accomplish all the good things your faith prompts you to do. Then the name of our Lord Jesus will be honored because of the way you live, and you will be honored along with Him. This is all made possible because of the grace of our God and Lord, Jesus Christ."* (2 Thessalonians 1:11–12)

Once more, this does not ignore our participation. However, it's a beautiful reminder that more is at work than our collective efforts. So, let's do more than be encouraged by Paul's benediction. Let's lift his petition to the God of peace in prayer. Will you join me?

November 18

Acts 18:24-19:20; 1 Corinthians 1:1-3:23

I appeal to you, dear brothers and sisters, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose. (1 Corinthians 1:10)

Paul spent considerable time during his second missionary journey in Corinth. He is familiar with the people and the personalities involved. While in Ephesus (during his third missionary journey), Paul writes to the congregation to address several issues and problems hindering their effectiveness. A contrast between Paul's letter to the Thessalonians and the Corinthians is worth noting. With the Thessalonians, Paul prays, affirms, reminds, and clarifies. With the Corinthians, Paul corrects, corrects, and then corrects some more. The church in Corinth appears dysfunctional in far too many ways.

A key area of concern is the interpersonal division within the congregation. Instead of being united in Christ, they have become fractured and divided. By Jesus' authority, the apostle appeals to the church members to live in harmony with one another. Perhaps Paul is mindful of Jesus' prayer for His future disciples. *"I pray that they will all be one, just as You and I are one—as You are in Me, Father, and I am in You. And may they be in Us so that the world will believe You sent Me."* (John 17:21)

The division in Corinth insults what Jesus desires for His people. It is also an indication of the congregation's spiritual immaturity. Paul expresses as much when he writes, *"Dear brothers and sisters, when I was with you I couldn't talk to you as I would to spiritual people. I had to talk as though you belonged to this world or as though you were infants in Christ. I had to feed you with milk, not with solid food, because you weren't ready for anything stronger."* (1 Corinthians 3:1-2) Paul then exposes the problem, *"For your sinful nature still controls you. You are jealous of one another and quarrel with each other. Doesn't that prove you are controlled by your sinful nature? Aren't you living like people of the world?"* (1 Corinthians 3:3)

Paul's question is telling. The church's superficial attitudes and actions mirror the unbelieving culture around them instead of reflecting the heart and mind of Jesus—the One they claim to follow. Again, Paul appeals to the congregation to set their pride and divisions aside. He also warns those who would contribute to the problem. He writes, *"Don't you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you? God will destroy anyone who destroys this temple. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple."* (1 Corinthians 3:16-17)

And what of us? Do we understand the seriousness of division within the church? Do we justify divisive actions and attitudes? Please know that the goal is not some form of superficial uniformity. A diversity of backgrounds and personalities contribute to the beauty of Christian unity. Instead, our Christian unity should be based upon our mutual relationship with Jesus Christ. We humbly relate to and follow Him, which causes us to relate to one another in humble and loving ways. He brings us together through His Spirit in a way that testifies to the unbelieving world around us. Is it possible then that there will still be times of disagreement? Certainly so. The difference is that we relate to one another through Christ in ways that strengthen the church, not weaken it. Paul's concern will continue to be emphasized further in the letter. May we take the lesson to heart and relate to one another accordingly. Let's join together and pray, "Lord Jesus, make us one even as You and the Father are one so that the world will see and believe in You."

November 19

1 Corinthians 4:1-7:40

My conscience is clear, but that doesn't prove I'm right. It is the Lord Himself who will examine me and decide. (1 Corinthians 4:4)

Paul expresses concern for the church in Corinth. He has been informed about the congregation's problems and seeks to address them. Unfortunately, a part of the church's problems is that Paul is being undermined among the members. Even though he is the one that God used to start the congregation, Paul is being disparaged by others. The man who gave sacrificially on their part is forced to defend himself and his ministry. However, Paul maintains the right perspective. The apostle cares more about God's evaluation than a crowd of self-promoting detractors. Paul confesses, *"As for me, it matters very little how I might be evaluated by you or by any human authority. I don't even trust my own judgment on this point. My conscience is clear, but that doesn't prove I'm right. It is the Lord Himself who will examine me and decide."* (1 Corinthians 4:3-4)

Nor will Paul remain silent as his critics accommodate wrongful behavior. He confronts the congregation's tolerance of a sexual relationship between a member and his stepmother. Paul is appalled and calls for the congregation to practice church discipline against the individual. For Christ's sake, they must disassociate themselves from the person so he might repent and be restored. Paul also reminds the church about the nature of sexual sin in general. When we reject God's wisdom concerning our sexuality and conduct, we dishonor our bodies and the Lord. Paul asserts, *"You can't say that our bodies were made for sexual immorality. They were made for the Lord, and the Lord cares about our bodies."* (1 Corinthians 6:13)

Yet, there's more. Sinful sexual behavior exposes Jesus to the unholy act. Paul explains, *"Don't you realize that your bodies are actually parts of Christ? Should a man take his body, which is part of Christ, and join it to a prostitute? Never! And don't you realize that if a man joins himself to a prostitute, he becomes one body with her? For the Scriptures say, 'The two are united into one.' But the person who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him."* (1 Corinthians 6:15-18) Paul later asks, *"Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God?"* (1 Corinthians 6:19) Their actions betray this understanding. Paul declares, *"You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body."* (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

Do we understand the same? Just as divisions within the church are an offense to the Lord, sexual misconduct defiles God's beloved temple and exposes Jesus in an unseemly way. And the appropriate response? As Paul commands, *"Run from sexual sin!"* (1 Corinthians 6:18) His words are simple and to the point. Don't toy with sexual sin, rationalize, or justify it. Turn away from the behavior because you value your fellowship with the Lord more. When we involve ourselves in sexual sin, we grieve God's Spirit within. In contrast, when we walk in the light of God's wisdom, we enjoy fellowship with the Lord and are positively affected by Him (1 John 1:5-7). Think of it this way. By our actions, we either positively or negatively affect Him, which then positively or negatively affects us.

Again, do we understand what Paul is teaching? I pray God grants us discerning hearts amid a morally confused and sexually reckless society. May we choose to walk in the light of God's wisdom because we choose to walk in the light with Him. May the Lord help us to do so, even today!

November 20 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1

You say, "I am allowed to do anything"—but not everything is good for you. You say, "I am allowed to do anything"—but not everything is beneficial. Don't be concerned for your own good but for the good of others. (1 Corinthians 10:23-24)

In today's reading, Paul highlights a principle that should guide our hearts and actions. What is it? Simply stated, *"Don't be concerned for your own good but for the good of others."* (1 Corinthians 10:24) Paul expresses the same to the Philippians when He writes, *"Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too."* (Philippians 2:4) And similarly, Paul appeals to the Roman believers, *"We should help others do what is right and build them up in the Lord. For even Christ didn't live to please Himself."* (Romans 15:2-3) Are we getting the idea? We don't live exclusively for ourselves as Jesus' followers. We often make decisions based on the greater needs of others.

How many of the problems in the Corinthian church would disappear if they embraced this lesson? Sadly, they allow pride and selfish desire to dictate their decisions. They are motivated by "me first" thinking. Paul calls Jesus' Church to something higher, something nobler. And it is a principle that Paul openly practiced. The apostle consistently adjusted his life to the more significant needs of the people around him. He explains, *"When I was with the Jews, I lived like a Jew to bring the Jews to Christ. When I was with those who follow the Jewish law, I too lived under that law. Even though I am not subject to the law, I did this so I could bring to Christ those who are under the law. When I am with the Gentiles who do not follow the Jewish law, I too live apart from that law so I can bring them to Christ. But I do not ignore the law of God; I obey the law of Christ. When I am with those who are weak, I share their weakness, for I want to bring the weak to Christ."* (1 Corinthians 9:20-22)

Do we hear Paul's heart? It's not about compromising oneself morally or spiritually. Instead, it's about sacrificing one's freedoms or rights for the spiritual benefit of others. If we recognize that something is detrimental to the spiritual health or well-being of the congregation, we do not demand our way. If we understand a particular action diminishes our public witness, we freely set it aside. A greater law drives us—Christ's law of love. We look for common ground that might bring the body of Christ together and strengthen our testimony to an unbelieving world. Paul confesses, *"Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some. I do everything to spread the Good News and share in its blessings."* (1 Corinthians 9:22-23)

Once more, Paul is not proposing that we become morally or spiritually ambivalent—quite the opposite. His appeal is that we allow more of Christ to be seen daily. Indeed, he urges, *"So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Don't give offense to Jews or Gentiles or the church of God. I, too, try to please everyone in everything I do. I don't just do what is best for me; I do what is best for others so that many may be saved. And you should imitate me, just as I imitate Christ."* (1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1)

Should we commit to doing the same? I recognize that what Paul asks is contrary to how many conduct their lives. The typical expectation or demand is for others to accommodate our desires or preferences. Again, the "me first" mindset is far too pervasive today. Yet, Paul is calling us to the "Jesus first" approach that elevates others for the sake of His Church and mission. As we do so, Jesus knows we will make a greater impact for His kingdom and experience more of Him in the process. So again, I ask, "Will we do so?" Will you?

November 21

1 Corinthians 11:2-13:13

A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other. (1 Corinthians 12:7)

Paul continues to address various issues that affect the Corinthian congregation. However, particular attention is given to the purpose and use of spiritual gifts. As is often the case among the Corinthians, something God provides to unite the congregation has become a source of division. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised. They found a way to make the observance of the Lord's Supper an occasion for envy and division (1 Corinthians 11:17-22). Their level of dysfunction is astounding, as further illustrated by their attitude toward spiritual gifts.

What is a spiritual gift? For the help and benefit of the Church, God Himself equips believers with various abilities to strengthen their collective work. The phrase "spiritual gift" can also be understood as God's "grace gift" to every believer. Indeed, Paul uses two Greek terms translated "spiritual" in our English bibles. He uses the term "pneuma" which is the word for "spirit," and he also uses the term "charisma" which is based upon the word for "grace." The use of both Greek words is instructive. The gift or ability is imparted through God's Spirit into the life of a believer and is an expression of God's grace for the larger good of the congregation. Ironically, the Corinthians took something designed to strengthen and unify the church, making it a source of pride and contention. They completely miss the point of their spiritual gifts.

Paul seeks to explain God's desire on their behalf. He reminds them that their gifts are imparted as God chooses and intends. There should be no boasting of one's gift over another as if one is specially selected and the other is not. They are all expressions of God's grace and are directed toward the believers' lives for the church's good, not personal praise. Nor should they diminish the role or function that some play within the church. They should elevate and celebrate those who serve in less prominent ways. The church will not succeed or thrive otherwise, for everyone has a part to play. God gifts every believer for the congregation's larger good.

Of course, people frequently ask, "What's my gift?" However, that's probably the wrong question. That focuses the attention back on you. The better question is, "What is God desiring to do through His church?" We should focus on God's work through the church and then move to help in ways we can. I'm convinced we discover God's gifts as we step toward service. Our collective service through the church allows God to demonstrate and confirm His gifting within. As Paul explains, *"A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other."* (1 Corinthians 12:7) So my suggestion is to pray, "Lord, what can I do to help?" And then step forward and help. As you do, God's gift of grace on your behalf will become more evident through your various acts of service. Resist making it about you. Focus on the church and others, and let the Lord handle the rest.

Paul tries to steer the Corinthians in the right direction. He reminds them that it is more about loving than doing, giving than receiving. We should then commit ourselves to love as Jesus loves. And what is that like? As Paul beautifully describes, *"Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance."* (1 Corinthians 13:4-7) May God help us to serve and reflect such love today!

November 22

1 Corinthians 14:1-15:58

I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me. Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was buried, and He was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said. (1 Corinthians 15:3-4)

Many issues contributed to the church in Corinth's struggles. Pride and selfishness are the primary culprits, but in some cases, the problem is a lack of clarity or understanding. Paul seeks to help the congregation navigate several disruptive situations—interpersonally and regarding worship. Paul's guiding principle for worship is relatively simple. Worship services should spiritually strengthen those who gather and be free from disorder or confusion. Sadly, the church in Corinth appears to fall short of that objective. The apostle seeks to guide them forward.

Paul also addresses a false teaching concerning the future resurrection of the dead. Someone has wrongly suggested to the congregation that the dead in Christ will not rise again. The false teacher is likely promoting the Greek philosophical idea that the body is evil and the spirit is good. In the Greek way of thinking, the spirit's escape from the body at death is preferable, and any thought of returning to the body is absurd. Paul encountered this same misguided thinking when he preached about Jesus' resurrection in Athens (Acts 17:22-31). Paul confronts the heresy and explains the implications.

Paul first reminds the believers of the veracity of the testimony surrounding Jesus' resurrection. He recounts the resurrection appearances of Jesus, concluding with his own experience—a day that Paul would never forget. He then illustrates how Jesus' resurrection correlates with our future hope. Because of Jesus' victory, we can also anticipate a future life. Greek philosophy has it all wrong. The body is not resurrected to its former state or condition—by no means. Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension secured something far superior. Paul explains, *“Our earthly bodies are planted in the ground when we die, but they will be raised to live forever. Our bodies are buried in brokenness, but they will be raised in glory. They are buried in weakness, but they will be raised in strength.” (1 Corinthians 15:42-43)* He adds, *“Earthly people are like the earthly man, and heavenly people are like the heavenly man. Just as we are now like the earthly man, we will someday be like the heavenly man.” (1 Corinthians 15:48-49)*

Have we heard the good news of Paul's message? Our future with the Lord is more than a slightly better version of the earthly life we know here. We will become as Christ is (1 John 3:2), and honestly, I don't think we can comprehend the glory of it all. Our loftiest thoughts are woefully inadequate. So don't be deceived or misled, Paul would write. Focus instead on the One who conquered death on our behalf. Anticipate a future victory. As Paul joyfully declares, *“We will not all die, but we will all be transformed! It will happen in a moment, in the blink of an eye, when the last trumpet is blown. For when the trumpet sounds, those who have died will be raised to live forever. And we who are living will also be transformed. For our dying bodies must be transformed into bodies that will never die; our mortal bodies must be transformed into immortal bodies.” (1 Corinthians 15:51-53)*

That is where our hearts should also focus. Anticipate a better day—unlike anything we have known. Please don't allow the misguided voices of our day to take our eyes off the promise of what will be. Indeed, may God strengthen our hearts with this future hope—making us (as Paul urged the Corinthians) strong, immovable, and working enthusiastically for the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:58). O Lord, may it be so. May it be so!

November 23

1 Corinthians 16:1-24; Acts 19:21-20:6; Romans 1:1-32

For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile. (Romans 1:16)

Life continues to be challenging for Paul. Opposition to the gospel persists. In Ephesus, he escapes yet another angry response to his message and ministry. It is worth noting that in Ephesus, controversy arose over a decline in business among the local idol makers. The population of Ephesus was responding to Jesus in such great numbers that people were no longer interested in worshipping lifeless pieces of stone or metal. Instead, they are experiencing spiritual life and transformation in Jesus—the Son of the One true God.

Paul departs from Ephesus to return to Jerusalem as his third missionary journey ends. He plans to travel through Macedonia, stopping in Corinth along the way. Wintering in Corinth, Paul also wrote a letter to the church in Rome. The Book of Romans is the longest and most theologically structured of Paul's thirteen New Testament letters and, throughout the history of the Church, perhaps the most impactful.

As Paul opens the letter, he expresses his desire to visit the Roman congregation. He had previously attempted to travel to Rome but had been prevented. Paul looks forward to strengthening their faith in Christ and expanding their gospel efforts. As the missionary admits, he is not ashamed of the gospel. He's convinced that *"it is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile."* (Romans 1:16) The key is to get the word out. People need to hear about the difference that Jesus makes.

Do we feel the same? Do we understand the spiritual power inherent in the message of Jesus? When we speak about Jesus' death and resurrection and testify to His ability to forgive and restore the worst of sinners, something greater than our testimony is involved. The Holy Spirit of God engages the unbeliever's mind, appealing to the heart. Indeed, God's Spirit draws the person toward faith so that the individual can respond to Jesus, experiencing His forgiveness and life. The point is that a greater power than ourselves is at work. It's not just about you and your ability to persuade. God Himself is working. Sadly, when we fail to share what we know, we fail to draw upon God's activity and power. Because of our silence, what could have been will not be—our unwillingness to share matters.

Does our sharing the gospel then guarantee a favorable response? The answer is "no." The person may still resist the Spirit's appeal within. Yet, each time we share, there's an opportunity for the miraculous. God may open the person's eyes to the truth of Jesus, resulting in their spiritual birth and eternal life. If that's a real possibility, why would we not share?

May God grant us the boldness to share what we know. Like Paul, let's not be ashamed of the gospel of Jesus but point someone to the truth of who He is. Who knows? We may witness the miracle of spiritual birth as the person turns to Jesus in faith. Let's speak up and allow God to display His power.

November 24 Romans 2:1-4:25

People are counted as righteous, not because of their work, but because of their faith in God who forgives sinners. (Romans 4:5)

Yesterday's reading concluded with Paul highlighting the destructive effects of a society that turns away from God (Romans 1:18-32). Suppressing the truth does not result in personal freedom. Instead, it produces confusion that works against a society's well-being. It places people and a nation on a downward moral and spiritual trajectory. It is not a good situation.

And how does sin affect the individual? Today's reading highlights its disturbing impact—whether Jew or Gentile, religious or irreligious. The result is God's judgment. Paul explains, *"Because you are stubborn and refuse to turn from your sin, you are storing up terrible punishment for yourself. For a day of anger is coming, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. He will judge everyone according to what they have done."* (Romans 2:5–6)

Paul's description should alarm us all because (whether we admit it or not) we are all sinners. Indeed, we have all violated God's standards. Citing the Old Testament, the apostle declares, *"No one is righteous—not even one. No one is truly wise; no one is seeking God. All have turned away; all have become useless. No one does good, not a single one."* (Romans 3:10–12) The problem is not limited to a few. It is universal.

What, then, can a person do? Try harder? Religious observances? The answer is "no" and "no." Our collective efforts will prove utterly inadequate. The Jewish people, for example, were given God's law—His standard for righteousness. But their possession of the law did not save them. Instead, it only further exposed their spiritual need. Paul exclaims, *"The law simply shows us how sinful we are."* (Romans 3:20) So again, I ask, "What can a person do?" The solution is Jesus Christ. Paul explains, *"We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are. For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God, in His grace, freely makes us right in His sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when He freed us from the penalty for our sins."* (Romans 3:22–24)

How is Jesus able to make a difference? Jesus can save the sinful because He offered Himself on the sinner's behalf. The sinless Son of God claimed our guilt so He could extend His righteousness (His right standing). Spiritually speaking, Jesus exchanges places with us. He suffers judgment so we can experience life. As Paul describes, *"For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed His life, shedding His blood."* (Romans 3:25) Paul later adds, *"He (Jesus) was handed over to die because of our sins, and He was raised to life to make us right with God."* (Romans 4:25)

The solution is Jesus, and our response should be one of faith. We cannot save ourselves—that much is clear. Our only hope is to trust in God's provision and promise. Like Abraham of old, we place our faith in who God is and His actions on our behalf. It is our faith response that changes our standing before Him. It is our trust in Jesus that addresses our sins. Have we done so? Have you done so? Of course, this has been a recurring theme in our New Testament readings, so it's certainly not new. Even so, it's the message we should keep before us. I pray we are encouraged and will continue to be as we press further into Paul's theological letter.

November 25

Romans 5:1-8:17

Well then, should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more of his wonderful grace? (Romans 6:1)

Our faith response to Jesus changes our standing before God. Instead of being pronounced guilty because of our sins, we are declared righteous because of Jesus' sacrificial death. Jesus makes the difference. Are our present and future actions then irrelevant? For that matter, doesn't our continuing sin only accentuate the wonder of God's gracious gift? Paul answers, "*Absolutely not!*" Our persistence in sin exposes a lack of understanding of God's gift. Jesus not only rescues us from sin's condemnation. Jesus also delivers us from sin's domination. Spiritually speaking, Jesus sets us free to discover the life God intends on our behalf. Paul explains, "*So, my dear brothers and sisters, this is the point: You died to the power of the law when you died with Christ. And now you are united with the One who was raised from the dead. As a result, we can produce a harvest of good deeds for God.*" (Romans 7:4) In other words, Jesus not only came to change our standing. He also came to change our conduct.

How does the change occur? Is it instantaneous? Are we passive spectators? What part do we play? First, Paul reminds us that a negative influence (our sinful nature) remains at work even after our faith response. Trust in Jesus does not eradicate one's evil desires. Everyone recognizes that the internal struggle between right and wrong remains. As Paul portrays, "*I want to do what is right, but I can't. I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway.*" (Romans 7:18-19) And the solution?

Our solution is centered again on Jesus (Romans 7:25). Just as Jesus changes our standing before God, our faith in Jesus should also change our walk. How so? Not by human effort alone—though our participation is involved—it requires the life-giving dynamic of God's Spirit (Romans 8:2). The Holy Spirit within seeks to guide and energize our steps. Hence, our words and actions begin to reflect Jesus' influence. This work of grace, however, does not happen without our cooperation. By faith, we learn to yield to the Spirit's presence and choose to act according to His leading.

The operative word is that we learn. Regrettably, we are prone to act according to our strengths and preferences, which then works against the Spirit's activity. Paul describes the contrast. He writes, "*Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit. So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace.*" (Romans 8:5-6) Paul urges us to set our pride and self-effort aside and discover an increasing awareness and dependence on God's liberating Spirit. Are we doing so?

It should be noted, as Paul does, that our response to Jesus should be whole-hearted. As Paul commands, "*Do not let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin. Instead, give yourselves completely to God, for you were dead, but now you have new life. So use your whole body as an instrument to do what is right for the glory of God. Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace.*" (Romans 6:13-14) Again, I ask, is this descriptive of us? Do you think it should be?

I pray God opens our spiritual eyes to His presence more so we might experience more of His grace and power. Would you pray the same? As we do, let's admit the mystery of what is being described. But don't allow the mystery to cause us to rely upon ourselves instead of Him. May we start each day by acknowledging our need and seeking His Spirit's activity—particularly today.

November 26

Romans 8:18-10:21

If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved. (Romans 10:9-10)

Salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ. As we respond to the truth of Jesus, we experience the power of His salvation and life. That is the good news of the gospel. As Paul declares, *“Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.” (Romans 10:13)* What a glorious message of hope for everyone who turns to Jesus! Yet, as today’s reading further highlights, God is not a spectator to His work of salvation. He is involved from beginning to end. The idea of salvation began in God’s heart. He is the One who initiated a covenant relationship with Abraham and chose the promised line of descent for humanity’s Savior. Again and again, God chose to bring about what was necessary so we might ultimately respond to Jesus in faith. We find salvation because of His direct involvement.

Does God’s activity negate human responsibility? Paul would exclaim, “Certainly not.” As Paul explains, *“How can they call on Him to save them unless they believe in Him? And how can they believe in Him if they have never heard about Him? And how can they hear about Him unless someone tells them?” (Romans 10:14)* Our responsibility is highlighted in two ways. First, someone must deliver the message for others to hear, for no one will respond to Jesus unless they are informed of His saving work. And second, as Paul notes, a person must also call out to Jesus in faith. Salvation is not imposed upon any individual. It is a gift freely received as the person turns to Jesus in faith. A response is required.

Regrettably, some push this discussion to two extremes. They emphasize God’s sovereignty to the exclusion of human responsibility or choice. Others emphasize humanity’s free will or choice to the exclusion of God’s sovereignty or election. The Bible, however, portrays both as operating and true. Salvation is undeniably God’s work from start to finish. Yet, the invitation to believe is not a charade or a scripted response. Our choices matter, and we will be held responsible before God—good or bad. The Bible introduces the tension between God’s sovereignty and humanity’s choice. We would be wise to leave the tension in place, admitting that more may be involved than our limited minds fully comprehend. I’m comfortable with the wonder and the mystery of it all. And you?

Salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ. Instead of being sidetracked by who is choosing whom or what? Let’s marvel that God extends a way of salvation to anyone. God would have been righteous and just to judge all of humanity because of their sins—myself included. Yet, God displayed mercy and grace in providing a way of salvation through Jesus, His Son. And yes, God extends an invitation for us to believe in Him. As we do, the promise is assured. *“Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.” (Romans 10:13)* Is this descriptive of you? I pray that is true.

Let’s conclude with Paul’s testimony concerning Christ’s unfailing love on our behalf. He writes, *“I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God’s love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God’s love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:35-39)*

Do I hear an “Amen”?

November 27
Romans 11:1-14:23

And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all He has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind He will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship Him. Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect. (Romans 12:1–2)

Given God's gift of salvation and His continuing work of grace in our lives, what does God deserve in return? Do we offer selective portions or the whole of who we are? Do we present the leftovers or give to God the very best? Paul urges us to offer our best. Indeed, he pleads with us to give ourselves back to God as Jesus made us—spiritual sacrifices that are living, holy, and acceptable. Are we doing so? Or, are we settling for something less—being influenced more by the world around us than by the God who loves us? Of course, when we respond fully to the Lord, we discover life in ways the world can never supply. The decision each day is ours.

Paul also reminds us how Jesus seeks to influence our thinking and actions for our benefit and others. In a series of short, practical statements, Paul illustrates the difference living sacrifices can make. He writes,

“Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other. Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying.”

Paul continues, *“When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them. Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all! Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable.”*

He adds, *“Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone. Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, 'I will take revenge; I will pay them back,' says the LORD. Instead, 'If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals of shame on their heads.' Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good.” (Romans 12:9–21)*

Which statement stands out the most? Which do you find the most challenging? Will you act upon them? Living sacrifices mean (with God's help) living the life God calls us to. Will we present ourselves to the Lord to reflect Jesus' influence? Join me. Let's commit ourselves to living differently today!

November 28

Romans 15:1-16:27; 2 Corinthians 1:1-2:4

We think you ought to know, dear brothers and sisters, about the trouble we went through in the province of Asia. We were crushed and overwhelmed beyond our ability to endure, and we thought we would never live through it. In fact, we expected to die. But as a result, we stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God, who raises the dead. And He did rescue us from mortal danger, and He will rescue us again. We have placed our confidence in Him, and he will continue to rescue us. And you are helping us by praying for us. Then many people will give thanks because God has graciously answered so many prayers for our safety. (2 Corinthians 1:8-11)

Paul's life is anything but comfortable. He faces challenges that I cannot imagine. He doesn't go into detail concerning his brush with death, but it is evident that death was a real possibility. He and the team did not think they would live through whatever the threat may have been. And Paul is honest about their emotions. They were crushed and overwhelmed beyond their ability to endure.

That should reassure our hearts. Strong emotions are not a sign of weakness. They merely reflect our humanity. However, Paul also models the response of faith amid overwhelming difficulty. He confesses, *"We stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God, who raises the dead."* (2 Corinthians 1:9) Instead of placing their confidence in themselves, Paul and the others renew their trust in the Lord. They recognize that He is with them and that His purposes are being fulfilled.

Paul also acknowledges the value and impact of prayer on the part of others. He attributes their recent escape as an answer to prayer on their behalf. In other words, our prayers matter in God's larger work. We should remember that as we become aware of the challenges that others face. Of course, first and foremost, we seek God's will and provision on their behalf—in life and death. Yet, our prayers are more than a religious exercise or discipline. God works through the prayers of His people. He works through our intercession. May we never lose sight of that.

Paul teaches us something more regarding life's hardships and trials. He reminds us of God's comfort amid the struggles. He writes, *"God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort."* (2 Corinthians 1:3) God is not indifferent to our difficulties. He seeks to help, strengthen, and reassure. The word *"comfort"* is the Greek term *"parakaleo."* It is a compound word that describes someone being called alongside. The same term describes the Holy Spirit's presence and work in a believer's life (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). He is our *"paraclete,"* our comforter and aid. He is the One called to help us in our hour of need and, no doubt, is the means of God's comfort within.

Yet, our suffering and comfort can also prepare us to extend God's support to others. Paul explains, *"He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us."* (2 Corinthians 1:4) Whenever we experience God's light in life's darker moments, we can introduce the same light as others are similarly affected. In so doing, we become an extension of God's love and support. Knowing this doesn't make our struggles any less difficult. Even so, Paul reminds us that something good can arise from the burdens we bear. We can become future instruments of God's grace, which will lift the hearts of others and our hearts as well.

No, Paul's life was certainly not a comfortable one. He faced challenges that we will never encounter. Yet, Paul's testimony and example should encourage and instruct. Instead of becoming defeated by life's hardships, let's renew our trust in the One with us. Let's also become a source of God's comfort in the process. Will you join me?

November 29

2 Corinthians 2:5-6:13

We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves. (2 Corinthians 4:7)

Many things stand out as we read 2 Corinthians. It is not Paul's second letter to the troubled congregation. It may have been his third or even fourth. Indeed, Paul references an earlier letter he sent that caused the apostle great anguish (2 Corinthians 2:4). His distress reflects the founding pastor's continuing struggle with a frequently self-centered and unappreciative congregation. Sadly, Paul is again compelled to defend his actions to a group of people who should have freely embraced the apostle's leadership and correction. We might remember that when we also feel wrongfully rejected or ignored.

Yet, amid the challenges, Paul highlights spiritual lessons that should encourage us all. He reminds us where our true spiritual life and strength are found. It is found in the Lord. Paul compares our lives to clay jars that are nothing special within themselves. Indeed, the more we look honestly at who we are, the more we recognize our human frailty and weakness. However, something remarkable has taken place because of our faith in Jesus. An invaluable treasure has been entrusted to us—Jesus' light and glory. That's right. God has directed His life into who we are so that we might actively reflect Jesus' goodness and beauty. As a result, we have become vessels of great spiritual value and worth, for we have become Christ's clay jars!

Because of that, we can display extraordinary strength and resiliency. As Paul portrays, *"We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed. Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies."* (2 Corinthians 4:8-10) The life of Jesus within us makes the difference. He generates a spiritual life and strength that withstands the pressures and trials surrounding us. Jesus enables us to shine in the darkness as He manifests His glory through us.

This does not happen apart from our faith response. His strength and glory are displayed through faith as we draw near to Him. As Paul described, *"And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like Him as we are changed into His glorious image."* (2 Corinthians 3:18) How incredible is that? Maybe you are wondering when this occurs. We should draw near to the Lord by faith each time we open our Bibles. We do not read to be informed. We read God's Word to refocus our hearts and renew our faith. We should confess to the Lord as we read, "Speak to my heart, Lord. Make Your glory known in me and through me."

Remarkably, Jesus can reflect His glory and strength in whatever the circumstances. Paul confidently exclaims, *"Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! 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 4:16-18) Again, how incredible is that?

I pray God will open our spiritual eyes to the possibilities of Jesus' work within us. Yes, let's admit our frailty and weakness. We are all clay jars. But may we also rejoice in Jesus' presence and sufficiency. His glory can be manifested in each of us as we relate to Him for who He is. May it be so—especially today.

November 30 2 Corinthians 6:14–10:18

For God is the one who provides seed for the farmer and then bread to eat. In the same way, He will provide and increase your resources and then produce a great harvest of generosity in you. (2 Corinthians 9:10)

Our reading today highlights the apostle Paul's instructions on generosity and giving. Indeed, 2 Corinthians 8-9 represents the most extensive teaching in the New Testament on the virtue of living generously. What exactly does Paul teach? He asks Jesus' followers to take their eyes off themselves so they might become instruments of God's blessing to others. To encourage them in that direction, Paul points toward two examples.

First, Paul directs our attention to the unselfish churches of Macedonia (Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea). He celebrates the generosity they display—their surprising generosity. Looking at these churches, they would be the last group of people you would expect to help (2 Corinthians 8:1-5). They are physically tested and financially poor. Yet, they give despite their limited resources. They chose to give beyond their means so they might make a difference beyond their ability—and what a difference they make. They not only relieve Jerusalem's suffering but become an inspiration for others to do the same. God often works that way. One act of generosity leads to another. Paul would say, *"Learn from the Macedonians!"*

Paul, however, has a greater example to promote—the selfless actions of Jesus. *"You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ," Paul writes. "Though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, so that by His poverty He could make you rich." (2 Corinthians 8:9)* Jesus gave much more than His resources. Jesus gave away His very life. In so doing, He provides an example that cannot be ignored. If ever a person lived generously, it was Jesus. And we are His followers?

Certainly, that is Paul's hope for those who would read His letter. Straightforwardly, the apostle appeals, *"Remember this—a farmer who plants only a few seeds will get a small crop. But the one who plants generously will get a generous crop. You must each decide in your heart how much to give. And don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. For God loves a person who gives cheerfully. And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others." (2 Corinthians 9:6-8)*

Do note that God is the original "cheerful giver." He freely gave on our behalf so our lives would never be the same. God gave His life so that we might live. We should never lose sight of the wonder of God's gift. Paul challenges us to display the same disposition. We, too, are to give of ourselves and do so cheerfully. The emphasis on "cheerful giving" highlights the heart of faith. We happily give because we give expectantly, for we know that God is the One who sustains us. As Paul explains, *"For God is the One who provides seed for the farmer and then bread to eat. In the same way, He will provide and increase your resources and then produce a great harvest of generosity in you. Yes, you will be enriched in every way so that you can always be generous." (2 Corinthians 9:10-11)* The Macedonians knew that. Jesus knew that. The question is, "Do we?"

The answer to the question is not verbal. It is displayed in the character and direction of our lives. For generosity is more than an action. It's a disposition of heart that overflows into a lifestyle. I pray we will embrace the lifestyle and prove ourselves generous indeed!

Devotions written and prepared by Stephen Lowrie
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