

## ROMANS: CHRIST, OUR REDEEMER

### PREACHING TRUTH: CHAPTERS 1-8

March 26

Romans 1:1-7 Good news

Now that we have learned something of Paul's life and preaching from Acts, we can see how his introduction in this letter lays out themes important to him:

- He was chosen to be an apostle on the Damascus road
- The good news was promised in the Old Testament scriptures
- Jesus is the king in David's line
- He was proven to be the Son of God by the resurrection
- Gentiles are included

Jesus as promised king of all takes us back to the gospels where he proclaimed the arrival of his kingdom. Paul was intent to take Christ's kingship to the earthly center of the ruling emperor. We learn from the final chapter that he had at least 26 close friends in Rome, including Priscilla and Aquila with whom he had lived and worked in Corinth. They had returned to Rome and had a house church there. He had not yet been to Rome, but wanted to stop there on his way to preach in Spain. We think he may have written this during his three month stay in Greece, probably at Corinth, before heading to Jerusalem where he was arrested for his commitment to preach to all people.

*Do I see Christ as challenging earthly rulers?*

March 27

Romans 1:8-17 Promised good news

Paul's life had been marked by Christ's call to preach to the Gentiles. He knew the good news was for both Jews and Gentiles, and he cared about his own culture as well as that of others. Rome was the crossroads of the world, and he had wanted to preach there, but also visit his friends.

We glimpse a remarkable life of prayer when he says he prays for them day and night. In Luke there were seven references to Jesus' private prayers, and we recall that he prayed all night before choosing the disciples.

Love and prayer for people who are part of our lives but now live at a distance is a model to which we can aspire. It is hard to devote time to something as abstract as requests for people far away. But Paul aspires us to try.

*Do I pray for distant friends?*

March 28

Romans 1:18-32 Perverse sin

Paul wrote from a place of idolatry to a place of idolatry. He was distressed as he had been when visiting Athens where he had pointed out that the creator had revealed himself by what he had made. People failed to even give him thanks for the wonders that surround us.

We remember how clearly the Gospel of John identified Jesus as Creator. "He created everything there is. Nothing exists that he didn't make. Life itself was in him, and this life gives light to everyone." (John 1:3,4). This universally available light has been ignored and replaced with images of people, birds, animals, and snakes.

Paul famously included homosexuality in the list of immoral behavior resulting from not acknowledging God. Today this is a contentious issue as gay marriage has been accepted as a civil right. Jesus' elevation of love of God and neighbor as our highest priority reminds us to address our differences of opinion on this issue with loving grace.

*Do I acknowledge Jesus as creator?*

March 29

Romans 2:1-16 Punishment for sin

Having blasted greed, lust, hate, envy, murder, fighting, deception, malice, gossip, pride, disobedience, unforgiveness, etc. Paul now blasts self-righteousness. It doesn't matter whether we have the law or don't, we all instinctively know a moral code and are taught it by our society. But sometimes we choose to break it and live for ourselves, which brings judgement. Paul said if we do right, there is glory, honor and peace.

Jesus can see our hearts, our secret life. He emphasized that it is our own thoughts that contaminate us and result in a long list of our bad behaviors. (Matthew 7:20-23) He also said he did not come to the world to condemn us, but to save us, and there is no judgement for those who trust him. Those who do not trust him are already being judged. (John 3:17-18)

If we substitute "Christians" for "Jews" and "non-Christians" for "Gentiles", we may find it easier to apply. If unbelievers obey God out of what their conscience says, God sees that. If believers disobey, he sees that. He is an impartial judge who takes all these things into account.

*What is in my heart?*

March 30

Romans 2:17-29 People of God

Paul challenged the most knowledgeable and committed believers in God of his time, and it makes sense for us to listen to the challenge ourselves. Are we hypocritical, not practicing what we preach? Is God's name cursed because of us? Do we trust in our church-going ways as a sign of our goodness? For the Jews, circumcision was an important mark of righteousness, but Paul said what mattered more was what it symbolized: a radical change of heart.

Jesus cautioned the super-spiritual that what mattered was true obedience. Spiritual reality shows in the fruitful lives of the loving character he called for. It is not enough to know our Bibles.

Our corporate Christianity is flawed. Those who tell us not to steal are caught by the IRS mismanaging funds. Those who tell us not to commit adultery end up in a public scandal. Those who hate idolatry allow themselves and their ministries to be idolized, or fall for celebrities and political leaders. We should be uneasy about the state of our public witness. If we refocus on praise from God, not people, perhaps we can do better.

*Am I overly impressed with famous religious figures?*

March 31

Romans 3:1-20 Power of sin

Having critiqued the religious, Paul said that they had been entrusted with God's promises, which is no small thing. God was faithful even when his people were not. Paul chained quotes from four Psalms and one from Isaiah to explain that all of us are in the wrong.

Jesus called for repentance and he said he was like a physician reaching the sick. He was firm and harsh in pointing out sin in self-satisfied religious people. His parable of the prodigal son helps us see the two roads of sin. The prodigal was obviously in the wrong, needing to return home, but the angry judgmental good older son needed reconciliation and love as well.

I am in the older brother camp, and so have become well aware that my judgement and critical spirit are as sinful as what I criticize. There is none of us with no sin or guilt.

*Am I able to see and confess my own wrongdoing?*

April 1

Romans 3:21-31 Punished for us

Given that Paul proved all--religious and irreligious, Jew and Gentile--are in the same dangerous place, needing a way out from our wrongness, he now turned to the way of safety. Of course it is Jesus who liberated us from guilt. His work is for all people, God in the flesh, removing the consequences of our sins.

Jesus said he could forgive our sins. He could make us clean. He could give us abundant life. He could give us the Holy Spirit to guide us. He could give us unending life. He could take us from darkness to light. He could take us into his Kingdom where God's good will is done.

We Christians today preach this, but then make some big mistakes. We act as though once we have believed, God is on our side and against everyone else. We are proud of our moral superiority and label people as "not okay" and judge them. We end up more like the religious leaders Jesus condemned than like Jesus. We need to return to what Paul just told us: the good news is for everyone. Jesus died for all and we need to tell everyone that God loves them. No exceptions.

*Do I show and share God's love to all?*

April 2

Romans 4:1-12 Put right with God

Paul made the case that it is faith that saves us. His example was Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation and father of faith. Abraham believed God's promise of a son and God declared him righteous. This was said in Genesis 15:6, and it is two chapters later (Genesis 17:9-14) when the rite of circumcision was introduced. This sign followed faith. Forgiveness and salvation are gifts, and he cited King David's prayer of penitence for sin.

In Jesus' ministry the interior unseen faith people placed in him resulted in visible healings. Twice he exclaimed over the faith of uncircumcised Gentiles who believed in him to the extent they could understand. "I tell you the truth, I haven't seen faith like this in all Israel!" (Matthew 8:10). "Dear woman, your faith is great. Your request is granted." (Matthew 15:28)

Having prayed for salvation over 60 years ago, my confidence has only grown through the years that forgiveness is real, heaven is real, Jesus rose from the dead, Jesus is God, and wisdom is available in scripture. My life choices have flowed from these fundamental certainties.

*How certain is my faith?*

April 3

Romans 4:13-25 Promised free gift

Paul focused on God's unlikely promise to Abraham to give the whole earth to his descendants. This was incredibly unlikely when Abraham did not even have a child, but he had confidence anyway. A definition of faith is "complete trust or confidence in someone or something". The unseen movement in our hearts results in things that can be seen. Romans uses "faith" 30 times, more than any other book. Paul says God makes us righteous through faith.

But here he pointed out that all who believe become Abraham's descendants. Through his descendant Jesus, the promise is fulfilled. Those with faith in Jesus cover the globe and someday all will bow down and call him Lord.

My faith for specific people and situations and hopes for others to come to faith can get wobbly. So it does me good to reinforce faith by reviewing promises in scripture, and reminding myself that God's love is greater than mine, God's wisdom is greater than mine, and God's power is greater than mine. With these reminders, my faith for any particular situation is strengthened.

*Do I return to God's promises and their fulfillment to strengthen my faith?*

April 4

Romans 5:1-11 Place of privilege

Paul encouraged us that in our faith in Christ, we are not only right with God, we can joyfully look forward to sharing his glory. We can rejoice at the character-building effect of our difficulties. All of this is on a foundation of knowing how dearly God loves us. He showed us his love by dying for us, and he has made us God's friends.

Each point reprises something Jesus told us. He assured us that those who listen to him and believe have eternal life and are passed from death to life. (John 5:24). He said he has given us his glory (John 17:22). He told us to rejoice in trials and sorrows because he has overcome the world. (John 16:33). He told us he loved us and that there is no greater love than laying down one's life. (John 15:12,13). He called us his friends (John 15:14,15)

It dramatically changed my prayers for others when I began to thank God for his love for them. If they were suffering, I could thank him for the endurance this was bringing. I could thank him that his love had brought them to salvation or was working to do so. Instead of the tinge of anxiety for people and almost feeling like my prayer was for God to love the people I love, I could rest in the depths of God's greater love for them.

*Do I believe God dearly loves each person?*

April 5

Romans 5:12-21 Pardon in Christ

Paul set up a contrast between Adam and Christ. Adam sinned and sin and death entered the world. Some form of the word death is repeated seven times and sin 15 times in this short section. Christ's righteous act brought the gift of forgiveness. Gift is repeated five times and is described as bountiful, gracious, and wonderful.

One person's tragic error is contrasted with one person's gift. When Jesus was on the verge of death, the High Priest proposed that it was better for one to die for all the people, not knowing he was speaking prophetically. (John 11:50,51). We see that doing wrong, feeling guilt, experiencing suffering, and fearing death are tragically describe mankind's plight.

But we have the option of receiving God's bountiful, gracious, and wonderful gift. The chance to change our gloomy reality to a positive one is good news well worth sharing. Our guilt is gone, we are given strength to endure suffering, and we look forward to heaven with Jesus as a new adventure not to fear. Christ made this possible with his one righteous act.

*Do I gladly share God's wonderful kindness in freeing us from sin and death?*

April 6

Romans 6:1-14 Power broken

Paul said that having been freed, we are no longer under the power of sin or death. We have new life. Given that, we can live well, but not carelessly. Some may think, "Being under God's grace means wrong things don't matter. I needn't be concerned about my violent temper, my alcohol abuse, my bad marriage, troubled children, financial mismanagement, gluttony, gambling, gossiping or any other fault. God forgives me." Paul said we should not take advantage of God's grace, but be quick to repent of any sin.

Jesus described it as walking in the light versus choosing darkness. If we are drifting into darkness in any area of our lives, we need to come clean, and get back into the light. We do not want any slavery in our lives. Ruth Bell Graham described the turn this way:

Pray

when all your soul on tiptoe stands  
in wistful eagerness to talk with God;  
put out your hands, God bends to hear,  
it would be sin not to draw near.

Pray

when gray inertia creeps through your soul  
as though a man who fights the cold,  
then growing languid slumbereth,  
and slumbering knows not it is death.

Pray  
when swamped with sin and shame  
and nowhere else to pin the blame  
but your own will and waywardness!  
God knows you, loves you nonetheless.

So...pray. -- Ruth Bell Graham (Footprints, p.46)

*Do I continually turn toward freedom?*

April 7  
Romans 6:15-23 Purchased by God

The natural question arises that if we are justified by faith and not by the law, are we not likely to live disordered, lawless lives? The truth is, says Paul, that we are now free to do so much better. Before we were slaves to sin, but Jesus has bought us, and now we are slaves to what is good. Sin paid out death; Jesus gives life.

Jesus, in his many critiques of the religious leaders, told them they were so busy trying to follow rules correctly that they were overlooking love. He said that his followers needed to have a higher obedience than those religious leaders, or they could not enter God's kingdom at all. (Matthew 5:20).

It seems very possible that we church people are more like the rule-based figures of Jesus' time and are failing to go to the high calling of love that is able to give us true freedom in our enslavement to good. That repeated call back to love and a changed heart matters more than other things.

*Am I receiving Jesus' life?*

April 8  
Romans 7:1-13 Produce good fruit

Paul had given the analogy that we were slaves to sin, and were bought to be slaves to goodness. Now he offered an analogy to show our relationship to the law. He compared the law to a husband. When the husband dies, his wife is free to marry someone else. To follow his analogy, the law was a good husband, but he was mortal and died. Now we can marry Christ. In his second analogy, we also died and the marriage was terminated. But we came to life with Christ and are now in union with him.

Christ foreshadowed this dramatic change of the status of the law. He said he did not come to abolish it, but to fulfill it. (Matthew 5:17). Since he was the goal of the law, he completed it. His critiques of how people observed the Sabbath, the food code, washing hands, the temple, sacrifices, and marriage vows always pointed to the deeper spiritual meaning of these things. He was preparing his disciples for the realization there really was a new covenant which fulfilled and transcended the old one.

I deeply appreciate how every part of the Old Testament is full of preparation for Christ's coming. In Song of Solomon there was a love story that teachers recognized also spoke of a mystical marriage, a deep intimacy with God. The apostles appreciated this and understood that they were able to connect old and new, Jesus had said that those who teach the law and are disciples of the Kingdom are like someone bringing both old and new things out of a storehouse. (Matthew 13:62)

*Do I celebrate the mystical marriage with Christ that Paul presented?*

April 9

Romans 7:14-25 Problems

Paul wanted them to understand that the law is good, because it teaches us a high moral standard. For example, we are not allowed to covet, and yet this interior invisible sin is easily broken and we realize we are in the wrong. The law is good, but we are bad! Even when we decide to do everything right, something the young Paul had certainly done, his fleshly ambitions and arrogance were still at work and came out in force as he persecuted the church.

Jesus made matters worse by saying it was not enough to love your neighbor, we need to love enemies. It is not enough to not murder, we need not to be angry. It is not enough to not commit adultery, we need to be free of lust. But then he made things better by saying that all we need to do is follow him. He will change us. The call to follow was repeated 87 times in the gospels. We make that move, and he will free us from sin.

I have been so struck that the law itself was not just the moral code and the rules of behavior. A great deal of it was about worship and a place of worship. The ability to ask forgiveness for our failures was built in to the way of worship which included sacrifice. The journey with God who was always present with his people foreshadowed the call to journey with Jesus and learn from him. There is a beautiful unity that centers around the person of Jesus.

*Do I see the solution to my moral failings by following Jesus?*

April 10

Romans 8:1-17 Power of the Spirit



Paul announced something important for us: there is no condemnation to those who belong to Jesus. I think that most of us who do believe in Jesus have a very hard time internalizing that, and there are voices around us and in our thoughts that counter that idea. In John 3:17 we are told “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it.” Do we believe this?

Paul’s explanation for why this is so is not only that Jesus forgave us, but that the Spirit lives in us and changes us. If he controls our mind, there is life and peace. Jesus promised the Spirit would come as comforter and teacher. One thing Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit speaks to us deep in our hearts telling us that we are God’s children. As his adopted children, our nature and our inheritance comes from him, so we can be free of our sinful nature and when we died, we will live again.

When tempted to feel condemned and discouraged, this chapter is a great antidote. We are not condemned, we are loved. “God loves me as his very own child.” Jesus loved to call God Father, and Paul here calls him Father, dear Father. My imperfect love as a parent is so strong that my children are always in my mind, and I do not condemn them no matter what they might struggle with--I want to help them through any struggles. Our heavenly parent is a perfect parent who is far more loving and uncondemning than any human one.

*Do I believe in God’s uncondemning love for me?*

April 11

Romans 8:18-30 Perfect future

In the last verse of the previous section Paul said if we are to share Christ’s glory we will also need to share his suffering. We really wish and hope not to suffer, but some form of suffering comes to us all. Paul gave a long list of sufferings he had been through when writing to the Corinthians, and his life was far from over when he wrote that. But he said here that it is nothing compared to future glory.

Creation itself is suffering, but it will be freed from death and decay when Christ returns, and we will be given new bodies. Meanwhile, the Spirit in us prays with deep wordless groaning. He pleads for us in harmony with God’s will. In the prayer Jesus taught is the request that God’s will would be done, bringing heaven to earth now. We have glimpses of heaven even when life is hard. But often the hard things cause us to question God’s love for us or others. We wonder if God’s will is truly loving or good.

I have noticed that people who suffer greatly, can take their tragedy and use it to help others. It neither explains nor excuses what went wrong, but it transforms it into something that can be beautiful and beneficial. It becomes a small glimpse of the values of heaven--of love, of justice, of peace, of compassion, of goodness. I think of a man whose son was murdered and

who joined with the grandfather of the murderer to bless his life in prison, and to jointly teach violence prevention in schools. I do not minimize his pain; I applaud his response.

We are told that the Spirit intercedes for us. The word used is only found in early Christian literature and means rescuing someone who is trapped. How good it is to know he sees what is trapping us and rescues.

*Do I believe God's will brings redemption out of suffering?*

April 12

Romans 8:31-39 Power over all things

Paul turned to poetry to celebrate the amazing love and protection of God once we have entered Christ's kingdom. It has been transformative for me to focus on how complete and perfect is God's love for us. Not just for me, but for all of "us"--for everyone that I care about, and for all believers that I do not know! It is transformative to realize that Christ is interceding for us. We often feel that if God really loved us he would protect us from suffering. Instead, this poem cites a list of frightening things and says that they are the enemies, but that they cannot overcome God's love. Seen this way, we can live from a baseline of security that is not dependent on circumstances. This is hard to learn, but if we do, it can change us.

I cannot improve on Paul's poem, but writing my own helps me internalize the thoughts:

Opposition is not anything  
When God himself is on our side.  
He chose and changed us, and when Jesus died  
He added every gift, everything.  
With him we died and rose to life above  
Where Christ enthroned now can intercede  
And give us everything we need.  
Because of his immensity of love,  
No trouble in this life, nothing at all,  
No creatures we can see or cannot see  
Can overcome his finished victory  
Nor harm us who are struggling and small.  
Jesus came as a tiny boy  
And made us victors in unending joy.

*Do I rest in the certainty of God's love for me?*

## PEOPLE OF GOD: Chapters 9-11

April 13

Romans 9:1-5 People of God

Having made the argument that Jews and Gentiles have both sinned, that both are saved by faith as Abraham was, that the law has fulfilled its purpose, and that we are free in Christ, Paul asked how these new realities affect God's chosen people. Though he was a Jew, he had become the apostle to the Gentiles, and he had repeatedly been rejected by Jewish leaders. In the next three chapters he makes an argument that is bolstered at each point by an Old Testament quote.

Not a diversion, this is central information to the new theological vision that all are now one in Christ. He had spent time saying being Jewish did not make one right with God. But here he pointed out gifts of being Jewish: chosen as God's children, seeing God's glory, covenants, law, worship, promises, and godly ancestors. And most important of all, Jesus was Jewish. We have two genealogies in the gospels that focus on this important aspect of who Jesus was.

I have come to appreciate the enormous gifts that the Jewish community brought to the world. Their culture and law were a cradle to prepare for Christ. We still appreciate their many gifts to the world and acknowledged with sorrow the centuries of anti-semitism of which Christians were guilty. We can do better today.

*Do I appreciate that Jesus was Jewish?*

April 14

Romans 9:6-24 Purposes of God

God sovereignly prepared Jesus' ancestors. Children were born to Abraham, but only Isaac fulfilled the Messianic promise. Without any actions on their part to justify the choice, God chose Jacob over Esau. We may wonder at this, and the idiom "Esau I have hated" is too strong in English; better is "I chose Jacob, not Esau.". But Paul reinforced God's right to pick favorites in creating his story by mentioning Pharaoh as a foil. God is an artist making beautiful pottery, and we have no reason to complain about his artistic choices.

All of these choices were leading up to the climax of the story: Jesus. Threaded through all this old history is a series of promises that a Messiah, savior, redeemer, king, prophet, liberator, and priest were coming. The rich treasure of Messianic prophecy in the Old Testament that we can see fulfilled in Jesus seems to me one of the greatest "proofs" of the faith. There are statistical improbabilities of such immense proportions that we can and should be filled with great awe.

*Does the fulfillment of prophecy awe and encourage me?*

April 15

Romans 9:25-33 Promise of God

Paul quoted from Hosea to say that it had always been God's plan to extend his family beyond Abraham's line through Isaac. Those not chosen to be part of preparing for Jesus would be invited in as adopted children. And, in fact, only a portion of those who were Abraham's physical descendants chose to become spiritual descendants. They failed to see Jesus as the one they were looking for.

Jesus told many parables that explained that though the kingdom was prepared for the Jewish people, their rejection of him meant that others would be invited in. One such parable was of a wedding feast where many refused the invitation, and less reputable people did come. He also quoted the scripture Paul used here that he was a rock who caused stumbling, but then became the cornerstone.

At first Christianity was a subset of Judaism, and only slowly was there a parting of the ways as Judaism defined belief in Jesus as Messiah as a heresy. But the God of Israel they continued to revere was the same God and so those who did not lose faith continued as a remnant, a small but continuing part of the heritage. In our time we have seen those who were spared such tragedies as the Holocaust become a recognized nation with the respect of the world.

*Do I see God's providence in the preservation of some of his people?*

April 16

Romans 10:1-13 Preaching grace

If we have followed Paul's argument so far, he has said that Jesus was Jewish, that God sovereignly chose Jesus' ancestors and prepared his culture, but that only some have continued to believe, and that Jesus opened the way for all people to be God's children. Here he returned to the theme that it is not by legal obedience that we are made right. It is God's loving message that we speak of, our belief, and calling on him that bring salvation.

Jesus called salvation the opportunity to enter his kingdom, and he framed belief not only as faith for some specific need, but also invited people to follow him as the sign of faith. Today we follow by telling others that is what we have decided to do. Paul's Old Testament proof text is Joel 2:32 "Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Paul wanted to show that the way of faith was presented both before and after the law. Obedience to the law mattered, but even in the law there was the promise of one who would come from heaven, and make it so the message would be on our lips and hearts. (Deuteronomy 30:12-14 quoted in Romans 10:5-8). He said that Jesus' incarnation and resurrection were

prophesied, saying they would bring God's message into our hearts. Paul thus saw continuity between faith and Christ's fulfillment of the law for us, and discontinuity in our subjection to it once Christ came within the very law itself. This was never clear to me as a young believer. I somehow got the impression that he advocated such a clean break he did not see value in it. But Paul seemed to say that the way to fulfill the law through faith in Christ was explained even within that law.

*Do I see continuity and discontinuity between Christ and the law?*

April 17

Romans 10:14-21 Pursued by God

Paul wrote that for people to believe the message, it must go out to all. We can see the shape of his argument by seeing how he punctuated each point with a proof text. In fact, for chapters 9-11 we see this pattern clearly, as he bolsters each step in his argument with an Old Testament quotation. In this section the argument and proof texts are as follows:

- 1) The message must be proclaimed, Isaiah 52:7
- 2) Not all will believe, Isaiah 53:1
- 3) The message goes to all the world, Psalm 19:4
- 4) This opportunity for Gentiles makes Jews jealous, Deuteronomy 32:21
- 5) Gentiles receive the message and respond, Isaiah 65:11
- 6) God keeps reaching out to Israel even if unresponsive, Isaiah 65:2

Jesus told his disciples to go into all the world to tell the world about him. (Acts 1:8). That command meant the message was for all the Gentiles, a word which means nations. Today we can see that has happened. Every country has a Christian presence. Media goes out where churches are few. Bible translators have gone to the most marginalized. That is not to say everyone listens, but the church keeps growing. We live an exciting time when even if our part is small, it is significant.

*Am I doing my part to spread the kingdom?*

April 18

Romans 11:1-10 Eyes closed

To address Israel's situation in rejecting Christ, Paul drew on the story of Elijah. Elijah thought he was the only one left who honored God, but God told him there were 7,000 others who remained loyal. Paul said that most Jews had not turned to Jesus, but some had. He then quoted scriptures from Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and Psalms to say that this blindness had been prophesied.

Jesus quoted Isaiah 6:9-10 to say that though people saw him act, they did not perceive the meaning of what they saw. They heard his words, but did not understand.

This spiritual blindness or at least foggy vision can afflict us today. We can go through life with a weak set of spiritual eyes and miss a great deal of what is happening around us. It is good to continually ask for deeper spiritual perception.

*Are my spiritual eyes open?*

April 19

Romans 11:11-32 Place in God's tree

Paul stressed his call as apostle to the Gentiles. He used an analogy, saying Jews were a tree with Abraham as the base of the tree. Branches were removed to make room for wild Gentile branches to be grafted in. Unfruitful branches were taken off and the same could happen if Gentiles became unfruitful. Paul said God's love and faithfulness would draw Israel back to him.

Jesus used the same metaphor of a fruitful tree, not only for individuals, but for the entire Kingdom of God. (Matthew 11:31). But he said that anyone who separates from him and is unfruitful is thrown away like a useless branch. (John 15:6)

The message of the Old Testament and New is that God's love is unfailing. He wants all to be saved. He has never stopped loving and longing for Israel, and he still loves them in spite of rejection. We have all become one tree in the mercy of God.

*Do trees I see bring to mind the Kingdom I cannot yet see?*

April 20

Romans 11:33-36 Celebration

Paul was overcome by God's greatness. He burst into poetry, drawing in Old Testament lines to acknowledge God's mystery and glory.

Oh, what a wonderful God we have!

How great are his riches, wisdom and knowledge.

How impossible it is for us to understand his decisions and his methods!

"For who can know what the Lord is thinking?

Who knows enough to be his counselor?" (Isaiah 40:13)

"And who could ever give him so much

That he would have to pay it back?" (Job 41:11)

For everything comes from him;

everything exists by his power and is intended for his glory.  
To him be glory forevermore. Amen

Jesus taught us to pray with acknowledgement of and delight in God's holiness. He celebrated God's kingdom, power and glory. In his prayer before going to the passion He asked for God to glorify him so he could give glory back. He wanted the disciples to see the glory given him before the world began. (John 17:1, 24)

Since there is much in life I do not understand, and God's part in it can be so mysterious, I am glad Paul let us know we do not need to think we grasp his decisions and methods. We can be like little children.

*Do I accept my own lack of understanding?*

PRACTICAL TEACHING: Chapters 12-16

April 21

Romans 12:1-4 God's good will

Given how wonderful God is, we owe him our lives. The promise is that as we give him our minds, he will transform our thinking, and we will discover "how good, and pleasing, and perfect" God's will is. We definitely need transformation on our attitudes to God's will. Because Jesus gave up his own will in great agony in the garden before the crucifixion, we often think of God's will as onerous or painful. We may even rather resentfully say, "it must be God's will" when things do not turn out as we desperately want them to. We often ask "Why God? Why did you let that happen?" So many things that happen to us do not seem "good, pleasing, and perfect."

The image of the world Paul has given us is that it is a place where great battles are taking place between good and evil. If we join with Christ to be on the side of heaven, we are part of trying to bring the perfection of heaven to earth. This is what Christ taught us to pray and said is God's will. But that process is full of suffering in this battleground. But, wrote Paul, if we find out what our part in the battle is we are part of Christ's redemptive story, which gives us peace in the middle of anything. We discover that God's will for us is "good and pleasing and perfect" as we find redemptive meaning in suffering.

As I look back on my life, I am surprised to see redemptive patterns in painful experiences. The transformations fill me with joy. All smooth sailing would make for a boring story, but the Great Novelist has creative plot lines and none of our stories are boring.

*Do I seek God's will for me with eagerness?*

April 22

Romans 12:5-8 Personal gifts

Our one word "gift" had at least three distinct words in Greek, and here we are offered spiritual abilities or traits with which to serve others. To some extent we may have all of these abilities, but some will be stronger than others and can guide us into our most appropriate ministries. 1) Prophet--speaks God's message, 2) Server--does what is needed, 3) Teacher--delves deeply into truth and shares it, 4) Exhorter--encourages and inspires others, 5) Giver--graciously meets material needs, 6) Leaders--organizes and motivates others, and 7) Compassionate people--able to console.

Jesus showed us all of these gifts at work. As a prophet he spoke God's words. He served and taught his disciples this was the way to greatness. He taught creatively. He exhorted people to higher efforts at love. As a giver he fed the hungry. As a leader he developed the abilities of his disciples. His compassion to the hurting was one of his strongest traits.

It is useful to reflect on our strengths and examine where we can develop them and use them more wisely and widely. Our consciousness that we are doing what we do best as energetically as we can can fill us with dignity and purpose.

*What is my strongest gift? How am I using it?*

April 23

Romans 12:6-21 Loving well

This section is so rich with practical advice on how to love God, neighbor, and enemies that it is helpful to turn each line into a set of questions for self-examination. For example: Am I outdoing myself to respect and honor others? Am I eagerly welcoming guests into my home? Am I holding any grudges?

Jesus told us that loving God is the greatest commandment, loving others the second, and loving enemies makes us like him. Practical ways of loving God include letting the Spirit fill us with excitement, letting hope burst out in continual joy, communing with God no matter what is happening. This section gives us a portrait of what it looks like to love our neighbors. And it concludes with very practical advice on loving enemies. The Passion Bible offers this helpful translation of Romans 12:20: "If your enemy is hungry, buy him lunch! Win him over with kindness. For your surprising generosity will awaken his conscience, and God will reward you with favor."

Truly internalizing all this advice would surely make us shine with Christ's love!

*Am I growing in love for all?*



April 24

Romans 13:1-7 Purpose of governing

Obey the government and pay your taxes, wrote Paul. For those of us who live in a democracy we could also add these duties: vote, exercise free speech when we see problems, and pray and trust God when we're quite sure our leaders are making poor decisions.

This respect for government, even one as oppressive as Rome that ended up killing him, was Jesus' instruction as well. When the religious leaders tried to trap him regarding taxes paid to Caesar, he said to pay them, but to simultaneously recognize the greater honor due to God. This builds on the long Old Testament tradition of the responsibility of prophets to rise up and denounce political leaders who are failing to honor God as they should.

Paul's comments can be misused to promote uncritical acceptance of political leaders. But if we keep the prophetic examples in mind, it can help us keep political leaders accountable. An inspiring example of this in our recent history was the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King Jr. articulated the values and goals of the non-violent protests that sought to bring about more just laws. The success of this prophetic movement is a bright light in our history. Our system makes room for protests and we are not disobeying the government to engage in them; in fact, we are adhering to the highest ideals of our laws.

*Do I have a respectful yet critically discerning attitude to government?*

April 25

Romans 13:8-14 Pay debts of love

Paul wrote that all the commands of the law are summed up in the command to love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus cited two commands as fulfilling the law: loving God and loving our neighbor. But John helps us resolve any perceived discrepancy by pointing out that if we don't love the neighbor we can see, we really cannot claim to love a God we cannot see. (I John 4:20)

Paul cited practical ways of living in the light. Jesus used the same metaphor in his call to move out of darkness to light. Paul advised us to let Jesus take control of us. Jesus spoke of taking his yoke on us which is easy and the burden light. His control is not onerous.

This is a primary means for our self examination to ask: "Am I loving my neighbor?". If we notice failures in this regard, we have an opportunity to repent and try to do better. We can ask others around us to help us see the extent of our strengths and weaknesses in this regard.

*How is my heart of love? Is it showing in my actions?*

April 26

Romans 14:1-23 Personal convictions

A practical result of the law's fulfillment in Christ is freedom in regard to what we eat or what days we observe in worship. He suggested that we be kind and adaptable about differences of opinion on this. He declared that the Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but of goodness, peace and joy in the Spirit.

Jesus emphasized the spiritual over external rituals as the mark of the Kingdom. Many Kingdom parables emphasize a process of slow spiritual transformation. He was repeatedly criticized for his willingness to heal on the Sabbath. In response, he said that compassion mattered the most.

In my younger years, playing cards, dancing, drinking, and smoking were off-limits behavior. That has changed, and today we might say that rigidity in political affiliation has become a point of contention. Our social media posts do not always demonstrate goodness, peace and joy in the Spirit. We can remember that each will have to give a personal account to God, and so we must not condemn one another.

*Do I value love above religious actions?*

April 27

Romans 15:1-13 Please others

Paul asked them (and us) to be considerate, harmonious, and accepting. He again called for unity between Jews and Gentiles and used three proof texts to show that God always wanted to bring the Gentiles into a life of praise. He concluded with one of my favorite verses: "I pray that God, who gives you hope, will keep you happy and full of peace as you believe in him. Pray you overflow with hope through the power of the Holy Spirit."

Jesus offered his disciples hope that though they would be briefly separated, they would soon see him again and be filled with wonderful and abundant joy. (John 16:20-24). He also promised them peace. (John 16:33). Isaiah's prophecy was quoted regarding Jesus, saying "his name will be the hope of all the world." (Matthew 12:21)

Ours is a hopeful, happy, peaceful faith. When we stop being hopeful, happy, or peaceful, it is time for a spiritual check-up. Verse 13 inspired me to start a collection of poems called "Moments of Hope and Laughter". The goal is to reinforce that spirit of hope, happiness, and peace. Here is one of my contributions to the collection:

When we moved into the house

I planted wisteria in the corner,  
wanting the lavish lavender blossoms  
to be mine.  
Excited at the first bloom  
of five-pointed lavender stars,  
seven years later I felt  
even more delight at the thousands of stars  
cascading with a flamboyant flourish.  
Chains of Lenten lavender,  
"Nazareno"  
for the Nazarene.  
Prelude to resurrection  
in riotous joy.

*Does my life radiate hope?*

April 28

Romans 15:14-22 Points of emphasis

Paul radiated joy as he recalled his role as messenger to the Gentiles. He said it was right for him to be enthusiastic about what Christ had done through him. He was grateful for miracles that won people over, and grateful he planted churches where no one else had yet preached.

Feeling delight and enthusiasm in ministry is something we see in Christ, particularly at the moment the 72 returned from their successful preaching and healing. He overflowed with joy and praise.

It is good for me to look back and take delight in ministry successes. I often forget what Christ has done through me. It is not pride of achievement but rather gratitude that God has been there and at work.

*Do ministry memories fill me with enthusiasm?*

April 29

Romans 15:23-33 Paul's plans

Paul's agenda was to go to Jerusalem with financial aid for the poor, then go to Rome, then on to Spain. His plans were drastically changed when he was arrested in Jerusalem, and Acts followed the story to his arrival in Rome as a prisoner under house arrest. It seems he may have been released, and so possibly did reach Spain, but we do not know for sure. We know he was eventually martyred in Rome.

In Jesus' ministry he very consciously headed for Jerusalem even though he knew he would be arrested. As Paul's journey progressed after writing this letter, it became clear that would be his destiny as well. He also received prophecies that he would preach in Rome, and he held on to that certainty.

Our plans for our lives may take unexpected twists and turns. We may think we have one destination for ministry and end up somewhere completely different. It does us good to keep God's love and sovereignty firmly in mind as we adjust.

*Am I flexible and accepting of changes in plans?*

April 30

Romans 16:1-27 Paul's friends

Paul had a lot of friends. We meet some of these figures in Acts, but the majority are only mentioned here, and we know no more about them. This rich tapestry included someone Paul felt had been like a mother to him. People he knew before he believed and who believed before him are mentioned. There are men and women. Paul was not a lonely man. He seemed to have a gift for deep friendships, and a wide array of friends.

We know how close Jesus became to his twelve disciples, but we also get a glimpse of his gift of friendship with more peripheral figures: women friends, those selected to be part of the 72, his family, etc. As we end this very theologically dense book, this chapter puts it into the context of the people with whom he was sharing his ideas. The thinking was never isolated, but was engaging with people.

It is a gift to collect many friends, and to have just openness and joy in people that it builds connection and attachment. When I see others who are so gifted in this area, it encourages me to have that same open heart.

*Do I connect well with many different people?*

I CORINTHIANS: CHRIST, OUR WISDOM

CORRECTION: Chapters 1-8

May 1

I Corinthians 1:1-9

Paul had spent a year and a half in Corinth, but at this point he had been away perhaps four years. In Ephesus where he was once more settled for several years, he received the news

that there were some problems among his old friends and converts that needed to be addressed.

Before addressing the problems, however, he spoke well of all the gifts they had, using the word three times and referring to these gifts of eloquence, knowledge and spiritual gifts. He encouraged them that they could be free from blame at Christ's return.

He spoke of their having been invited into friendship with Jesus. Jesus told his disciples "You are my friends if you obey me. I no longer call you servants, because a master doesn't confide in his servants. Now you are my friends, since I have told you everything the Father told me." (John 15:14,15) Paul extended this to these Corinthians, and by extension, to us as well. We are privileged to call Jesus our friend.

*Do I see Jesus as my intimate friend?*

May 2

I Corinthians 1:10-17 Holy people

Paul expressed distress that the church in Corinth had chosen their favorite preachers and were divided as a result. He appealed for unity, saying all of these voices, including him, were subordinate to Christ.

This competitive attitude is with us today as well--we adopt some speaker and prefer his preaching. Countering this is the New Testament example with many voices--Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, Peter, James, Jude. They all point to Christ with their unique perspectives. Christ's life was presented from four viewpoints, and each New Testament book has a particular flavor that comes from the personality and interests of the writers.

Openness coupled with discernment needs to be our attitude as we listen to those given as gifts to the church today. There is beautiful and helpful diversity in an overarching unity. I like this motto: "In essentials, unity. In nonessentials, diversity. In all things, charity."

*Am I willing to listen to people from outside my group?*

May 3

I Corinthians 1:18-31 Human wisdom

Paul pointed out the lack of intellectual respectability of the cross. The death of Jesus seemed foolish to Jews who wanted a supernatural sign, and to Greeks who prided themselves on their sophisticated philosophy. The mystery of God with us, dying in an unjust death, rising again, and freeing us from sin and suffering is a wisdom beyond the expectations of religion or philosophy.

Jesus said wisdom is shown to be right by its results. (Matthew 11:19). The mysterious death of God led not only to his resurrection, but to life for all mankind. It is ultimate wisdom.

A question arises whether this means Christians must not respect learning. C.S. Lewis wrote that scholarship offered to God can be worthy work and a legitimate calling. In the essay "Learning in War Time" he wrote "If all the world were Christian it might not matter if all the world were uneducated. But, as it is, a cultural life will exist outside the Church whether it exists inside or not." (p. 50). All truth is God's truth, and there is room for intellectual work, creation and appreciation of art, scientific discovery within the broad wisdom created by cross and resurrection.

*Do I appreciate Christ as the center of all wisdom?*

May 4

I Corinthians 2:1-9 Hearing truth

Paul brought the plain message of Jesus and the cross, and did not try to impress with oratory. He taught God's secret and mysterious wisdom that has great purposes for those who love God.

Jesus brought God's wisdom to people by means of storytelling, aphorisms, miracles, and his crucifixion and resurrection. He is the center of God's secret and mysterious wisdom to bless the world. Whatever other knowledge or wisdom we acquire, it is subject to the foundation of Jesus' wisdom. If we soak ourselves in his teachings we will gain perspective on all of life.

C.S. Lewis wrote that the war had made it clear how fragile human wisdom is and that this pointed up what was always true: "If we thought we were building up a heaven on earth, if we looked for something that would turn the present world from a place of pilgrimage into a permanent city satisfying the soul of man, we are disillusioned, and not a moment too soon. But if we thought that for some souls, and at some times, the life of learning, humbly offered to God, was, in its own small way, one of the appointed approaches to the Divine reality and the Divine beauty which we hope to enjoy hereafter, we can think so still." (page 53-54)

*Do I appreciate Jesus' wisdom in his teachings as well as his life?*

May 5

I Corinthians 2:10-16 Wisdom of the Spirit

Paul wrote that we have an enormous advantage in our quest for spiritual wisdom because the Spirit knows God's thoughts and shows them to us. Until we have the Spirit in us, we do not have access to that wisdom.

Jesus made the remarkable promise that when the Spirit comes to us, he guides us into all truth and reveals God's ideas to us. Jesus shared with the Spirit who shares with us. (See John 16)

This is a gift worth celebrating. Life is mysterious and we need wisdom not only to understand what is true, but to make wise decisions. When puzzled by anything, we have an extraordinary resource in being able to ask the Spirit, "Please explain." How beautiful the promise that we have the mind of Christ.

*Do I ask for insight from the Spirit?*

May 6

I Corinthians 3:1-9 Having favorites

Paul returned to their problem of preferring teachers. He himself was supportive of Apollo's ministry and was encouraging Apollo to go back to Corinth again. (I Corinthians 16:12). The problem was not between the two of them. The problem was in the immaturity of the Corinthians who had competing fan clubs for their favorite leaders. Paul wrote that God who makes the seed grow is far more important than those who plant or water.

Jesus used a similar metaphor of the growth of the seed of the Word into fruitfulness. (Mark 4:1-20). He said that "the seeds planted and grew without the farmer's help because the earth produces crops on its own." (Mark 4:27,28). God has put this growth principle into both natural and spiritual things.

We have many amazing pastors and teachers in our time who plant and water. If we are not overly attached and appreciate them, we can keep God's word central and let it do the work in our hearts.

*Am I fruitful?*

May 7

I Corinthians 3:10-23 How we build

Paul used a chain of metaphors to describe who we are. We are a building with Jesus as the foundation and teachers are master builders. Testing by fire will show the quality of materials used in the construction. We are God's temple, a building with a spiritual purpose.

Jesus compared himself to a foundation stone rejected by the builders, which is now the most important cornerstone. He also compared himself to God's temple. He repeatedly used the idea of fire as a symbol of judgement; Paul offers the hope that this is a purifying process.

I ask myself if I am building with gold, silver and jewels that will survive testing. Is it our love, our character, our service, our prayers, our worship, our words that will be tested? Perhaps we can see some of the difficulties we go through as a process of purification to show us what really matters, and what the quality of our work truly is right now. We then have the chance to change course.

*Am I building with gold, silver, and precious jewels?*

May 8

I Corinthians 4:1-9 How faithful am I?

Paul asked that both he and Apollos be seen as God's servants. He then wrote a practical motto for us: not to evaluate ourselves through the judgment of others, but to let God judge us. We need to offer the same grace to others, since we never really know all the facts. Either positive or negative comparisons can be harmful.

Jesus told us not to judge lest we be judged. He said that if we are looking down on others, we will receive back the negativity we are offering. We are to leave evaluation in God's hands.

This is helpful since I often think I am not measuring up spiritually to others. I don't have the same successes, I don't have the same skills, nor do I have the same wisdom. If I remember that I am primarily accountable to God, that helps: "Am I doing what you want? Are you pleased with me?". As Paul wrote, it is not even our own self-evaluation that matters.

*Am I pleasing You, Lord?*

May 9

I Corinthians 4:10-21 Hungry and thirsty

Paul pointed out the hunger, mockery, beatings, homelessness, and hard work he had endured. He pointed out that he blessed his enemies, was patient and gave gentle responses to criticism. He asked them to follow his humble example and let go of their arrogance.

Jesus was subject to similar mockery, beatings, homelessness, and hard work. He blessed enemies and responded gently during the entire passion. Both Paul and Jesus laid out this example for us to follow.

In our Christian culture today we may need to remember this. We have fallen into a professional Christianity with classy marketing, good food, really nice homes, living comfortably, and seeking public recognition. Instead of gentleness, we offer harsh words. Have our leaders fallen into the arrogance Paul critiqued?



What matters is whether God's power is truly evident, since that is the mark of the Kingdom.

*Am I willing to follow Paul and Jesus in ministry and be uncomfortable if necessary?*

May 10

I Corinthians 5:1-13 Condoning sin

We come to an extremely painful critique. The church had accepted an incestuous relationship with no reproach and no repentance. The perpetrator needed to be removed so that he could potentially be saved.

Removing evil was compared to the annual practice of removing yeast for Passover. Leaven symbolized sin, and it was purified in preparation for the Passover Lamb, Christ himself. Paul said we cannot expect to avoid sinful people since we would have to leave the world. But in the church we do have a responsibility to be honest and separate ourselves from people unwilling to confront their own hypocrisy. Jesus modeled this by eating with sinners, but by also confronting the religious who were sinning and not aware of it.

In our time we have suffered horrendous sexual scandals in the church. While very sad and hurtful, it is helpful to realize that scandals are nothing new. The sorrow we feel, Paul felt. The need to discipline and hopefully restore those who have fallen into dramatic sin is painful. Paul pointed out how necessary it was to face that pain.

*Do I see the need for church discipline when harmful sin is corrupting the church, particularly for those in leadership?*

May 11

I Corinthians 6:1-8 Healing disagreement

Paul appealed for Christians to resolve conflict face to face, inside the community. He admonished people not to go to court. Let yourself be cheated if that is necessary, he said.

Jesus also told his followers to resolve conflict, to work for reconciliation, and not to be litigious. (Matthew 5:21-26). He advocated dialogue, mediation, and if truly unresolvable, politeness over intimacy. (Matthew 18:13-18)

I am not sure we are very good at this. Unresolved conflicts lead to church splits, divorces, family disputes, etc. It uncomfortably reminds us that hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, divisions, and party spirit are all defined as works of the flesh not allowed into the kingdom. (Galatians 5:19-21). We desire to hear this message and do better.

*Is there someone with whom I have a conflict that I need to work on?*

May 12

I Corinthians 6:9-20 Healthy bodies

Our bodies are compared to the temple of God where the Spirit is present. Our bodies are said to be part of Christ. This picture makes any kind of sexual sin, idolatry, theft, or abuse something horrifying. We cannot connect Christ and sin using our bodies. We see all these sins as abhorrent for Kingdom people.

We also need to recall Jesus' gentleness to prostitutes and other sinners. He gave no example of harsh rejection, but rather a tenderhearted openness to receive anyone, gently calling them to repent. The religious people were horrified by how much he accepted sinful people.

Our tenderness in loving people into the kingdom can help free people from sin in which they are trapped. If we were victims of these entrapments, it can help us encourage others their sins can be washed away.

*Do I glorify God with my care and treatment of my body?*

May 13

I Corinthians 7:1-16 Marriage and singleness

Paul's advice regarding marriage, separation and divorce has so much practical wisdom. He offered principles that can help us today:

- 1) Singleness is a gift
- 2) Marriage is a gift
- 3) If you separate, remain single and try to reconcile
- 4) If an unbeliever won't reconcile, let them go
- 5) If a marriage is too conflicted or abusive, let it go. God wants peace.

Sometimes Christians trying to be faithful to the redemptive possibilities in marriage which Paul mentions, overlook the necessity of letting go which he also mentions. With abusive or addicted spouses a Christian will be advised to hold on, when it may be wise to let go and see what God will do.

Jesus raised such a high standard for marriage that made divorce a terrible option. Both Paul and Jesus made remarriage a non-option. Faced today with a 30% divorce rate in the church, and a 15% remarriage rate, we have had to realize "this, too, can be forgiven."

Paul told us to look at singleness or marriage as gifts to which we are called. We may have each gift at different points in our lives and so receive either one with gratitude and wisdom.

*Do I see both singleness and marriage as a gift?*

May 14

I Corinthians 7:17-24 Making good decisions

Paul wrote that to obey God as new believers, we do not need to change our circumstances but rather learn to live well within them. He cited ethnicity and employment status. But if you have a chance to get free from slavery, he wrote, take it.

Not to change seems contradictory to Jesus' repeated calls for people to leave what they were doing and follow him. He did not think well of the excuses several people offered that they needed to stay where they were (Luke 9:57-62)

Perhaps it is our own experience that can reconcile these different points of view. On the one hand we need to learn contentment in our circumstances, and not always be thinking that if something would change, all would be well. We need to learn interior changes that bring contentment in any circumstance. On the other hand, we need to be ready to follow in a new path or place when the Spirit is nudging us to make a change. The fundamental question is whether we are willing to do whatever God calls us to.

*Is my heart willing to stay where I am or to go elsewhere if God calls?*

May 15

I Corinthians 7:25-40 The gift of singleness

Paul presented the many advantages of singleness: one can be less concerned about the mundane, more concerned about God's work and more concerned about devotion to God. Marriage is fine, he wrote, but singleness is better.

Paul and Jesus both modeled the fulfilled, giving, integrated life of single men fully committed to God. The joy in their lives contradicts our perception that a married life is more fulfilled.

In our time when people marry late if at all, it is important to pay attention to the positive benefits of singleness. We overvalue romance and marriage, and our divorce rate shows our disappointment. We can value singleness or marriage lived to the full "in the Lord." Far better to remember singleness is God's gift, to enjoy and take advantage of relative freedom, and not obsess unhappily that one is not married.

*Do I value singleness?*

May 16

I Corinthians 8:1-13 Be respectful

Paul gave practical principles for interactions with people from a different religion, or whose Christian convictions differ from our own. Paul encouraged being considerate, respectful, and humble. Paul did not see anything wrong with associating so much with unbelievers that once would eat at their temples. (verse 10). This level of engagement with people from other religions can inspire us to cross some boundaries and be willing to build cross-religious friendships. But we must be considerate if a convert from that religion, for example, feels uneasy and needs to put up some boundaries.

The religious leaders were offended when Jesus ate with notorious sinners. He justified his choice to do this by say he was sent to call sinners. Our cross-religious friendships need to have Christ's loving presence with them.

As we engage person-to-person with people from other religions, we will share meals, we may attend something they invite us to that is a religious observance. We need to keep our eyes on the people and their value, and gently ignore any idolatry. Paul points out that it is not a real challenge to the true God.

*Am I respectful when with those from other faiths?*

CHURCH LIFE: Chapters 9-16

May 17

I Corinthians 9:1-16 Hard work

It bothered Paul that the Corinthians did not offer to help him when he was preaching there or when he went elsewhere to spread the good news. The Philippians were markedly different and repeatedly generous. It hurt even worse that men he did not respect came and received money. He deserved it and did not get the offer. They did not deserve it and did get it. Others lived in homes and brought their wives. Paul did not.

Jesus also expressed a slightly plaintive sense of homelessness when he said, "Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.". We get a glimpse of those who helped financially and of homes he stayed in as he traveled.

The objective differences in being treated well or poorly, and objective differences in how others who are our equals or even doing less are treated can be as hurtful today as they were for Paul. He sounds downright irritated by the injustice, something that I find reassuring when it seems necessary to share irritation to try to resolve a conflict. He found a source of comfort that can comfort us as well. He said that if he was doing this for himself he would expect pay, but since he was doing it for God whatever happened was okay.

*Is what I do motivated by service to God or by money?*

May 18

I Corinthians 9:17-27 Held in common

Paul taught an important ministry principle here: cultural adaptability. He adjusted his actions and message as much as possible to his audience, fitting in to the best of his ability. He would even share the oppression of others. He always looked for common ground. He then used the metaphor of being a trained athlete running a championship race. This was particularly appropriate in that the Olympic games were held near Corinth.

By this very example Paul was looking for common ground. He was using a culturally relevant example to speak of the spiritual determination they needed to have. Is this not what we call "incarnational ministry"? Just as Jesus left his place in heaven to be part of a poor family, Paul left his home and fit in with new people and places, even when that meant humble living.

In our time when cultures connect across and within countries, there is a need for all Christians to develop comfortable cross-cultural skills. The beauty of each tradition needs to be respected and appreciated. Every culture can connect uniquely with Christ, and we need to be careful not to judge. Different is not necessarily wrong, and Paul's adaptable advice is practical.

*Do other cultures interest and intrigue me?*

May 19

I Corinthians 10:1-13 Helpful examples

Paul pointed out how Israel's story served as a warning. After remarkable miracles they fell into idol worship, sexual immorality and grumbling. As a result they died. We also need to learn from their example and face our temptations with strength and determination.

The notion that the Old Testament stories serve as warnings is one Jesus drew on as well. He said, the destruction of Tyre and of Sodom and Gomorrah should warn those rejecting his message. Jonah preached to Nineveh and they repented; he was greater than Jonah and they were not responding. The Queen of Sheba came to Solomon for his wisdom, but they were not coming to him.

Scripture stories not only prefigure Christ, they teach us how to be or how not to be as the people of God. As we immerse ourselves, we can draw out the lessons.

*Do I read all the scriptures with interest and an eye to application?*

May 20

## I Corinthians 10:14-33 Hindering others

This chapter has been helpful in recognizing how lovingly we need to be in interactions with people from different religions, and from different kinds of Christian convictions. We can freely interact without worrying that we are in danger from “so-called gods”. Paul told us that of course we will be around people who worship idols, since that is a normal part of the world (I Corinthians 5:10). He warned that the idols, though not real gods, may have demonic influences behind them. But his advice is not to be too concerned, just be considerate and adapt to the convictions of other Christians.

In the gospels Jesus never mentioned idols, but he frequently evicted evil spirits from individuals. This work is something he passed on to his disciples. If we are ever in a situation where we feel there may be something unseen but evil, we also have the right to ask that it be evicted.

Since Christ has all spiritual power, we can cross religious boundaries with gracious love. As Paul told us, there is only one creator God, and one Lord Jesus Christ. In their power, we can be confident.

*Am I discerning of unseen spiritual realities?*

May 21

## I Corinthians 11:1-16 Covering our heads

Most Christians interpret the instruction for women to cover their hair in worship as applicable in that particular culture. Some still follow this as a sign of respect, particularly here in Latin America. But in the context of placing women under men and men under God (patriarchy) Paul made a small move toward equality. He pointed out that all men come from women at birth, and says they are interrelated.

In Jesus’ story the honor of bearing him given to Mary meant that she would be called the most blessed of women. In so much art and church culture, this is so. Her role in his birth deeply interrelates them.

Patriarchy is a problem still. We struggle with equal pay, glass ceilings, presence at high decision-making levels, and respect that does not harass. We can hardly be too critical of this commentary about cultural expectations of women when we still struggle. Instead we can take Paul’s cultural nudge toward equality seriously.

*Do I value gender equality?*

May 22

## I Corinthians 11:17-34 Cup of communion

Paul gave beautiful words for remembering and celebrating the Lord's supper. He wanted this to be a loving time when meals were shared equality and graciously. He wanted them to have forgiven hearts to participate.

The gospels treat this important moment differently. John did not include it at all, though his account of what was said at supper was the longest of all. Luke gave a longer interaction over the meal and two cups of wine. Matthew and Mark recorded Jesus saying "this is my blood" but not, as here, "do this in remembrance of me."

Paul said each time we do this we are announcing the Lord's death until he returns. The Eucharist focuses on the central mystery of our faith and is a highlight of our worship.

*Do I remember and appreciate as I take communion?*

May 23

## I Corinthians 12:1-11 Holy gifts

When we give and receive gifts, the best ones are a combination of the unexpected but appropriate and they bond giver and receiver in love. God chooses to let the Holy Spirit show himself through us in different ways. But like any good gift, they are fitting even if unexpected.

Jesus let the Holy Spirit flow through him in these gifts. 1) Wisdom--he knew how to teach well and to reach the heart of whoever he was speaking to. 2) Revelation--he had inside information on people or situations that was beyond normal knowing. 3) Faith--he had the power to make things happen. 4) Healing--this was the most characteristic outward action in his ministry. 5) Miracles--he showed control over nature in astonishing ways. 6) Prophecy--he spoke God's words. 7) Discernment--he could see the spiritual realm clearly. The only gift we do not see in him is tongues, but we know he prayed.

For us, being able to receive and pass on appropriate and unexpected demonstrations of the Spirit, can fill us with delight and anticipation. God knows what is our most appropriate set of actions in the world.

*Are my hands open to receive God's gifts for me?*

May 24

## I Corinthians 12:12-31 Unity

Today our American church body has some fractures that need to be reset and healed. White evangelicals accept racist rhetoric without flinching, impossible for many of us. Abortion and

homosexuality are part of electoral politics, not spiritual needs. Treatment of those who are poor is a contentious issue rather than a source of unity.

Jesus asked that his disciples be one so that the world will know that God sent him. Today our apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle workers, leaders, translators, etc. are ubiquitous in our overly rich media environment. But they contend with one another and we can feel confused about who is right.

We need help toward unity because we are failing badly. Each one of us needs to make a commitment to listen, and try to hear what is underneath what is said. We need to pray for those who trouble us as well as those we admire. We need to have a vision of a church that incorporates all languages, races and cultures, some diversity in customs and interpretation, and has great patience.

*How am I contributing to the unity of the body?*

May 25

I Corinthians 13:1-13 Healing love

This inspiring section on love cannot be meditated on too much. Jesus is, of course, the most perfect example of love and in the gospels we see the practical outworking of kindness, patience, humility, not giving up, not keeping a record of wrongs, and enduring through all, in the stories about him.

Paul taught us that love is far more important than spiritual gifts, ministry, or even faith. The qualities of love he described compare to ideas in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount:  
patient--"Don't resist an evil person! If you are slapped on the right cheek, turn the other, too."  
(Mt. 5:39)

kind--"Do for others what you would like them to do for you." (Mt. 7:12)

not jealous--"Don't do your good deeds publicly, to be admired, because then you will lose the reward from your Father in heaven." (Mt. 6:1)

not boastful/proud --"God blesses those who realize their need for him..." (Mt. 5:3)

not rude--"God blesses those who are gentle and lowly..." (Mt. 5:5)

doesn't demand its own way --"God blesses those who work for peace.... (Mt. 5:9)

not irritable--"God blesses those who are merciful..." (Mt. 5:7)



keeps no record of being wronged --"God blesses those who are persecuted..." (Mt. 5:10)

never glad about injustice--"God blesses those who are hungry and thirsty for justice..." (Mt. 5:6)

rejoices when truth wins out--"Your word is enough." (Mt. 5:37). "Teach them your word which is truth." (John 17:17)

This verse gives me a lot to think about: "'Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.'" (verse 7). If my faith is weak, perhaps the real problem is that love needs to be stronger. As love deepens, faith and hope strengthen. Instead of artificially convincing myself something will happen and calling that faith, I can remember that God loves me and others, and that love matters most.

The chapter, originally a poem, lends itself to being sung, and here is one version by contemporary singer Kelly Willard:

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels  
And though I prophesy, and understand all,  
And though I have all faith, so mountains may be removed,  
And though I feed the poor, and give up my life

Chorus: If I have not charity, If love does not flow through me,  
I am nothing, Jesus reduce me to love.

Love is patient and kind, love is not envious.  
Not proud, but gentle and meek, seeks not its own way.  
Love sings when Jesus prevails, believes and endures all things,  
Love hopes and bears every wrong, and love never fails. (Chorus)

One season I was a child, I spoke and thought as a child,  
When I turned into a man, such ways put aside.  
Though now we see through a glass, then we shall see face to face,  
Though now abide faith and hope, the greatest is love. (Chorus)

*Am I being conformed to this image of love?*

May 26

I Corinthians 14:1-9 Love our goal

Paul was about to launch into exposition on the gift of tongues, a gift controversial for the Corinthians and controversial in our times. But before this discourse, he had inserted a passage

on love which began with the caution that “tongues of men and angels” don’t amount to much without love. Here he repeated that love is our highest goal.

That said, prophetic gifts and tongues are useful, but prophecy is much better because people can understand it. Paul encouraged them to desire both gifts. Jesus promised languages as a gift (Mark 16:17), and he was the one who told them to wait for the power of the Spirit to fall on them in Jerusalem. When it did, tongues that visitors from many countries could understand was the result.

Since the early 1900s, this charismatic gift saw a reappearance and resurgence. The result is that millions today use this gift. The caution that love is the highest goal still applies.

*Is love my highest goal?*

May 27

I Corinthians 14:10-19 Spiritual language

Paul wrote that there are many languages in the world and all are excellent for those who understand them. We now know that the number is around 7,000. He encouraged learning to be understood, something dedicated Bible translators have done.

He wrote that tongues is our spirit praying whether we understand it or not. He suggested that both praying the the Spirit and praying in our own language are good things. We recall Jesus’ admonition that those who pray should go to a private place, and that God, who sees what is done in secret, will reward us. Paul seemed to suggest that those speaking in tongues would do best to use that gift in private prayer.

In public, the point is to be understood and to say things that benefit others and honor God. Those words are prophetic words, and we should always have our minds open and connected to God to hear from him what he might like us to pass on to others.

*Do I trust the value of secret prayer?*

May 28

I Corinthians 14:15-25 Spiritual language

The quote from Isaiah in context was foreigners with a foreign language being allowed to oppress God’s people who refused to listen. Because they did not believe in God, he brought in a foreign language as a sign to them that they needed to repent. Paul reframed this into a prophesy of speaking in tongues, still a sign for unbelievers as it was in Acts 2. But now the way the sign worked was that people heard and understood their own language in a miraculous way.

In general, though, the gift of tongues is not understood, and so non-believers would think this is just craziness. Certainly that is true in many cases now, and there is a great deal of skepticism about what is going on. It is much more important for believers and unbelievers to understand in their own language. If it is God-inspired speech it can supernaturally convict by including information that a human being would not know, and thus open minds to God.

Jesus repeatedly knew what people were thinking and was able to say something that amazed his audience. That God-inspired speech is what we are after.

*Do I believe that God can give me insight beyond my own natural knowledge?*

May 29

I Corinthians 14:26-33 Hearing in community

Paul encouraged orderly meetings of sharing prophetic messages, and if there were tongues spoken, to include interpretation. Perhaps this implies that the Corinthians had become chaotic in the way they ran their meetings. He urged calm and order and for everything to be useful to all present.

Jesus was the principle speaker wherever he was: synagogue, countryside, or temple. The corporate observance in prayer and participation developed after his ascension as the disciples met together as he had commanded.

Perhaps there is always a danger of falling into disorder on the one hand or of falling into boredom on the other. We can always find something to critique in our church services. But we want to aspire always to making everything useful to all present.

*Do I seek to make my church useful to all?*

May 30

I Corinthians 14:34-40 Role of women

Paul said something that reflected the patriarchy of his time--men over women, and women to be silent. This verse has effects today with many basing a principle that women should never instruct men on this verse. Our workplaces are working hard to have equality between men and women, though not always successfully, as reflected in a strong bias still toward men in the top positions.

We recall Jesus' respectful kindness to women, and the way he made women messengers of his resurrection to the men. His prayer for oneness prefigured Paul's call to equality: "There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female for you are all Christians--you are one in

Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28). That passage as well as examples of female prophets (Deborah in the Old Testament, and Philip’s daughters in the New) tells us that there are speaking roles for women. Paul’s many female co-workers such as Priscilla, Lydia, Euodia, Syntyche, Phoebe, Julia, Nympha, Apphia, etc. also reinforces women in ministry. Perhaps there were some loud tongues-speaking women in Corinth who were disruptive.

In Christ, we are one. That vision has slowly crumbled slavery, is crumbling patriarchy, and is working at crumbling racism. Dignity for all.

*Do I have an appropriate respect for women today?*

May 31

I Corinthians 15:1-11 Hope in Christ

The translator Arthur Way justified introducing hymn forms when other translators did not by explaining “On examining the passages which are here printed as hymns, we observe that in almost every instance they break the even flow of the argument, or rise with a sudden leap above the more or less colloquial style which precedes or follows. We note that the interruption is not in style only, but in sense; their matter is of a more general, more impersonal nature; sometimes they sum up, as in a rapture, the statements already made: conclusions calmly deduced and soberly stated are suffused with a sudden glory.” (p. xix)

This chapter is full of such hymns and we begin with what Way called a Resurrection Creed:

Messiah died for our sins,  
According to the Scriptures.  
He was buried, and was raised the third day,  
According to the Scriptures.  
He was seen by Kephas, then by the Twelve;  
Thereafter was He seen by over five hundred brethren at one time,  
Of whom most survive even until now;  
But some have slept in death.  
Thereafter was He seen by James,  
Then by all His apostles.

Paul was grateful that he, too, saw Christ, recalling his vision on the Damascus road. The Resurrected Christ, he said, is the center of our faith. This great hope has kept the church growing for 2000 years. This gives perspective from which we can see all things in a hopeful light.

*Do I live celebrating resurrection?*

June 1

I Corinthians 15:12-34 Hope for resurrection

Next comes a hymn of Resurrection and Exaltation:

He is the first sheaf of a great harvest,  
Of all who have been hushed to death's sleep.  
For, since through a man came death,  
Through a Man too has come resurrection of the dead.  
For as, by their part in Adam, all are dying,  
So, by their part in Messiah, shall all be quickened into life.  
Yet must each come in his befitting rank--  
Messiah the firstfruits,  
Then, in the Day of his Coming, Messiah's Own.  
Then shall be the End,  
When he surrenders the Kingdom to God, the Father,  
When he has brought to nought all other lordship,  
all authority, all power:  
For 'He must be King  
Till God has thrust all foes beneath his feet.'  
The last foe to be brought to nought is death;  
For all things--all--hath God 'bowed beneath his feet.'

(Paul pointed out that is with the exception of God.)

And when all things are bowed submissive to him,  
Then shall the Son too bow submissive  
To Him who bowed all beneath him,  
That God may be the All, the All-pervading.

*Do I celebrate that all will bow to Christ?*

June 2

I Corinthians 15:35-49 Our resurrection bodies

Paul's poetic celebration continued with a hymn of the Resurrection of the Body. He said to think of the body as a seed.

It is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption:  
It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory:  
It is sown in weakness, it is raised in might:  
It is sown an animal body, it is raised a spiritual body.

As surely as there is an animal body,  
So surely is there a spiritual body.

Yea, this is the meaning of that which is written,--  
'The first man, Adam, came into being as a living existence.'  
The last Adam as a life-giving spirit.  
Yet not first was the spiritual, but the animal;  
Then the spiritual.

The first man was of the earth, a vessel of clay;  
The second Man is from Heaven.  
As was the vessel of clay, so are the sons of clay:  
And as is the Heavenly One, so are the sons of Heaven.  
And, as we have borne the image of the vessel of clay,  
We shall bear also the image of the heavenly One.

*Does this promised of a new body overcome any fear of death?*

June 3  
I Corinthians 15:50-58 Overcoming death

A Hymn of Victory follows:

We shall all--  
Not, sleep in death, but--  
We shall all be changed.  
In an instant, in the flash of an eye,  
At the last trumpet-call.  
For the trumpet shall sound,  
And the dead shall be raised, imperishable;  
And we, the living, shall be transformed.  
For this perishable frame must clothe itself with the imperishable,  
When this mortal frame hath clad itself with immortality,  
Then shall come to pass the word that stands written--  
'Death hath been swallowed up in victory!'  
'Where, O Death, is that thy victory?  
Where, O Death, is that thy sting?'  
His sting is given to death by sin;  
Its power to hurt is given to sin by the Law,  
But to God be the thanks, who is ever giving us the victory  
Through our Lord, Jesus the Messiah!

*Do I celebrate that Jesus has defeated death?*

June 4

I Corinthians 16:1-24 Giving

As Paul turned to the subject of money and giving, his first priority was for them to collect money for the poor in Jerusalem. Secondly, he encouraged them to bless Timothy when he came to visit. This plan obviously changed, because when forced to leave Ephesus suddenly, he left Timothy in charge there. From the next book we will discover that he sent Titus to see them instead. He was encouraging Apollos to visit them.

Paul's concern for generosity to Jerusalem had several sources. One was the encouragement he had received to remember the poor by the other apostles. (Galatians 2:10). Another was for this to be a thank you from the Gentiles to Jews who had first shared the gospel with them.

In a passing reference we see that Jesus and his disciples may have given financial gifts to the poor. (John 12:4-6). Jesus gave food and medical care over and over! His financial advice included lending money without concern for repayment. (Luke 6:35). He offered the encouragement that if we give our gifts will be given back to us in greater measure. (Luke 6:38)

There are so many good organizations today that work with development and are using money wisely to multiply it in the lives of those who are poor. It is more than possible to be generous and to continue to make a dent in the needs of the world.

*Am I contributing to those who are poor?*

II CORINTHIANS: CHRIST, MERCIFUL ONE

COMFORT: Chapters 1-7

June 5

Intro II Corinthians 1:1-7 Paul comforted

After writing the first letter, Paul had to leave Ephesus because of the riot, and he went to Philippi. He had sent Titus to Corinth and was waiting to hear back and was worried. When Titus arrived, he comforted Paul, since the believers in Corinth had responded well to his admonitions.

He was struck with God's mercy and the fact that God comforts us. God's comfort to us allows us to comfort others. The more we suffer, the more comfort we receive. Paul used the word comfort seven times in this brief passage, showing how much it was on his mind.

We are reminded of Jesus' beatitude, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." The very fears, worries, concerns and anxiety we experience become an occasion for peace and joy, because of God's comfort to us.

*Do I experience God's comfort when I mourn?*

June 6

II Corinthians 1:8-14 Delivered from danger

Paul shared with them that he was overwhelmed and wondered if he would live in the dangerous situation he had just been in at Ephesus. The rioting mob had wanted to harm him and did drag in some believers (Acts 19:23-41). He left town and traveled to Macedonia with nine traveling companions. But here we glimpse how he felt about such a dangerous situation: "we expected to die". But God delivered them and he was encouraged that God would continue to deliver them as a result of prayers offered for their safety.

This is an encouragement that if we are concerned for the safety of others, our prayers can help. In his long prayer before the passion, Jesus had said, "I'm not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one." (John 17:15) In the prayer he taught the disciples he asked "deliver us from the evil one." (Matthew 6:13)

As Martin Luther wrote, "And though this world with devils filled, should threaten to undo us. We will not fear for God hath willed, his truth to triumph through us."

*Do I pray for the safety of myself and others?*

June 7

II Corinthians 1:15-24 2:1-4 Travel plans

Paul explained that he had planned to stop in Corinth on the way from Ephesus to Macedonia (Philippi and Thessalonica) and then again on his way to Jerusalem. But he delayed visiting to avoid giving them a strong personal rebuke. Instead, he was waiting to see what response he would get from the first letter he had sent from Ephesus. He said he had cried over that letter.

This letter is particularly full of raw emotion and vulnerability. Also, even though many of Paul's letters include hymn fragments, this one, particularly in chapters 3 to 6, seems to have many. Arthur Way who was an English schoolmaster who translated the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and Paul's epistles, presented these fragments as poems, as we will see.

Paul's emotions over seemingly unrepentant people reminds us of Christ's tears over unrepentant Jerusalem. The emotional bond Paul felt is expressed in this line: "Surely you



know that my happiness depends on your happiness.” Paul was clearly such a dynamic independent person, we can hardly accuse him of co-dependence, but his love and intimacy made him emotionally vulnerable, and someone who could be hurt. Even in that, the love of Christ shown through him since we see similar emotional vulnerability in Christ.

*Do I allow myself deep levels of emotional attachment and the real possibility of being hurt by others?*

June 8

II Corinthians 2:5-11 Grace for the sinner

How does a situation of church discipline ideally end? With repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Paul called for the church to treat the one disciplined with tenderness lest he become discouraged.

Jesus gave us a process when a fellow believer is at fault. First we are to go to them privately and seek to bring about repentance and reconciliation. If that does not work, we should take a witness or two along to be part of another effort. If that still does not change the situation, we go to the church leadership and ask for mediation. Hopefully the mediation will work, but if not, we need to withdraw politely. (Matthew 18:15-18)

Our lives are troubled by conflict and disagreements. We need all the help we can get to know how to resolve them, how to remain true to our own convictions, and how to get help from others. We need to see this as an opportunity for growth and not merely a source of distress.

*Do I work to resolve conflicts?*

June 9

II Corinthians 2:12-17 Telling good news

Troas was near present-day Istanbul, but Paul was too anxious about the Corinthians to stay there and went over to northern Greece. He does not continue the story of Titus' return until chapter 7. Instead he compared himself to perfume that is life-giving to those being saved, and a death-smell to those perishing. Our lives are like perfume Christ presents to God.

Three times perfume was presented to Christ in the gospels. Once by the Wise Men at his birth, once by a sinful woman, and once by Mary of Bethany. When the women went to the tomb with spices he was already gone. In each case, the offering of perfume was a form of worship.

As Christ presents us to God, may our lives be a form of worship. May we have a pleasing influence on those around us. May there be beauty.

*Do others see beauty in my life?*

June 10

II Corinthians 3:1-6 Trusting God

Paul compared those who responded to the message as a letter from Christ with him as the scribe. The ink was like the Spirit, and what was written on was their hearts.

It was a mini parable, appropriate from someone who used letter-writing as an important means of ministry. The only story in which Jesus wrote is when the adulterous woman was brought to be stoned. As he wrote in the dust, the woman's accusers melted away. His writing challenged their hearts.

We are such a literate culture that the metaphor is apt. I am a book written by many influences, the printing is the Spirit, and the readers are others in my life.

*What do others read in the book of my life?*

June 11

II Corinthians 3:7-18 Truth revealed

In the next three chapters we have numerous poetic interventions. Paul began by saying that the law had such glory that Moses had to veil his face so they would not see the glory fade. The new covenant is so much more glorious. Symbolically the veil comes off by believing in Christ.

Some form of the word "glory" is repeated 13 times here. The brightness, the light, the presence of God is celebrated. In the Gospels glory occurs over 40 times, with over half of those references in the Gospel of John. Jesus promised to give his glory to his disciples, something Paul described as our reflecting him as in a mirror.

The final verses of the chapter are shown as a short poem:

All of us, with face unveiled  
Gazing on the mirrored glory of our Lord,  
Are hourly being transformed into the same likeness,  
From a mere reflected glory into an inherent glory,  
As may well be, since it proceeds from the Lord, the Spirit.

*Am I serving as a mirror that reflects Jesus into the world?*

June 12

II Corinthians 4:1-7 Treasure in us

Paul continued with the theme of "glory" four times in this section. He mentioned the glorious light of the Good News, the glory of Christ who is the exact likeness of God, the glory of God in the face of Jesus, and glorious power from God, not us. Here he compared us to perishable containers that hold the precious treasure of God's light and power.

That we can be filled with God's Spirit and the identification of Jesus as light, and we as his light-bearers, is made even more mystical with the promise that giving us his glory can make us one. "I in them and you in me, all being perfected into one." (John 17:22,23)

Whenever we are confused about what God is like, we need to look at Jesus. That is where God can be seen most clearly. When we see him clearly, we have a much better idea of what we should be. These beautiful images lead us to spiritual realities where our nature changes and people begin to see Christ in us more and more. When we are empty, we can ask to be refilled with his love and light and power.

*Do I see myself as a living container for God's Spirit?*

June 13

II Corinthians 4:8-18 Trials to thanksgiving

In this letter Paul several times shared his sense of his own physical fragility and suffering, and in this section Arthur Way expressed it like this:

One every hand hard-pressed am I--yet not crushed!  
In desperate plight am I--yet not in despair!  
Close followed by pursuers--yet not abandoned by Him!  
Beaten to the earth--yet never destroyed!  
Evermore bearing about in my body  
The imminence of such a death as Jesus died,  
So that the life too of Jesus may be shown forth  
In this body of mine.  
Always, always, while yet I live,  
Am I being handed over to death's doom  
For Jesus' sake!  
So that in this mortal flesh of mine may be shown forth also  
The very life of Jesus.

Jesus took on the fragile human flesh that could be tortured and killed. He knows the weakness of our bodies. If we are aware of physical pain or illness or limitations we have in

both Jesus and Paul the example of allowing the very weakness of our bodies to bring God glory. As Paul said though our bodies are dying, our spirits are expanding. Our present troubles are limited compared to our future.

*Do I accept physical limits as a way God can use me?*

June 14

II Corinthians 5:1-10 Tent on earth

Way has a continuous poem, the Hymn of the Home eternal, that flows through chapter 4:16 to 5:10. A selection follows:

Ah yes, we know that if this mere tent,  
Our habitation of earth, be taken down,  
A solid building, reared by God, we have still,  
A habitation no hands fashioned ever,  
A home eternal, in the Heavens.  
And while yet we are in this tent, we are sighing sore.  
Ever longing, longing, to overdrape us  
With the mantle of that mansion which is of Heaven.

We have gone from poems of reflecting Christ, to one on the stresses of ministry, to this promise that our bodies will be raised and taken to heaven. This is a great hope and reminds us of all the poems in I Corinthians 15 on the resurrection. Christ's resurrection body was a combination of wonder and ordinariness, and then when he ascended into heaven, we were thereby given assurance this will be our future.

Mankind fears death, but Christ takes away that fear. In its place he puts the hope of life in heaven with him where we will be at home.

*Do I have the hope of heaven in my heart?*

June 15

II Corinthians 5:11-21 Task of reconciliation

We have three poems in sequence. This first Way called the Hymn of the New Life.

The love of our Messiah constraineth us;  
For to this conclusion have we come--  
One died for the sake of all; in Him then did all die.  
Yea, and for all did He die,  
That the living should live no more for themselves,

But for Him who died for them,  
And rose from the dead.  
So from henceforth we appraise no man by human standards;  
Ay, and if we have fixed our thoughts upon Messiah's humanity,  
No more do we so think of Him  
Whoso hath passed into that New Life of Messiah,  
He is created anew:  
The old life has passed away:  
Lo, it has become new!

After this poem come two shorter creeds. The overall result is a mystical appeal to us to see ourselves as one with Christ in his death and resurrection, becoming righteous in our union with him.

God was present in the Messiah  
Reconciling to Himself the world,  
Cancelling the record of their transgressions.

Jesus knew not sin;  
Yet God made him to be The World's Sin  
For our sakes,  
That we, whose sin he had thus assumed.  
Might become, by our union with him,  
The very righteousness of God.

*Do I see myself as one with Christ?*

June 16  
II Corinthians 6:1-13 True ministries

Paul has taken us from God in us, to struggles in ministry, to the hope of heaven, to mystical union with Christ. Now he once more returns to how suffering in ministry is something to be glad about.

In many-sided endurance--  
Amid afflictions, sore straits, and privations,  
Amid scourgings, prison-cells, and riots,  
Amid toils, night-vigils, and fastings: --  
In purity, in spiritual illumination,  
In long-suffering, in kindness,  
In the Holy Spirit's presence, in love unfeigned,  
In uttering the Message of Truth, in using the might of God: --

Ever at point to die--yet lo, I live on!  
Chastened by suffering, yet never done to death;  
Sorrowing ever, yet evermore glad;  
Poor myself, yet bestowing riches on thousands;  
Having nothing, yet holding all things in sure possession!

Jesus also gave us a vision of physical and emotional suffering in ministry. He called Paul and the apostles to this and he now calls us.

*Can I accept that ministry is hard?*

June 17

II Corinthians 6:14-18 Temple of God

Way calls this final poem of the chain a Hymn of Consecration. It is a call to purity, We are like a temple in which God is dwelling and there needs to be complete purity.

What fellowship hath righteousness with lawlessness?  
What common meeting-ground have light and darkness?  
What concord can be between Messiah and Belial?  
What partnership can be between believers and unbelievers?  
What compact between a temple of God and idols?  
'I will dwell in their midst, I will walk among them,  
And I will be their God, and my people shall they be.'  
Therefore, 'Come out from among them, and sever yourselves,  
Saith the Lord,  
And cleave not to the unclean thing;  
And I will accept you, and I will be to you a Father,  
And ye shall be to me as sons and daughters,  
Saith the Lord, the Almighty."

Jesus, who identified himself as God's Temple is the ultimate example of purity. He lived comfortably interacting with sinners and yet never compromised his own identity. That is the model of purity to which we aspire.

*Do I have a solid and uncompromised identity in Christ?*

June 18

II Corinthians 7:1-7 Titus' good news

Paul picked up the thread of the story after he arrived in Macedonia, looking for Titus. His vulnerability in his relationship with the Corinthians is evident. He was hurting and anxious. He

was discouraged, but Titus encouraged him by saying the Corinthians still loved him. "You have made me happy despite all our troubles."

We see this same emotional vulnerability in Jesus as his disciples fell asleep in the garden. They did not seem to understand or care about his agony. After the resurrection at the breakfast on the beach, three times he asked for reassurance of Peter's love, and three times he received it.

This helps me see that being in tune with the Spirit still makes room for emotional upheavals over damaged relationships. There is room for our humanity and the ordinary consequences of caring about others.

*Am I aware of my own emotions?*

June 19

II Corinthians 7:8-16 Turned from sin

Paul's emotions were all over the map: sorry he wrote, glad he wrote, needing reassurance, delighted by Titus' happiness, grateful... He was grateful that the pain he caused had brought about positive results.

Jesus' emotions also come through in the gospels: compassionate, sad, angry, weeping, in agony, joyful, concerned, etc. However, we never see him fearful.

Some of us did not learn to be aware of our emotions either because our upbringing was very detached or was too chaotic to make room for our feelings. Paul's expressions of vulnerability make me like him more. A successful evangelist is intimidating, but this shows him engaged in the messy realities of relationships.

*Do I express my emotions well?*

CARING: Chapters 8-13

June 20

II Corinthians 8:1-15 Taking an offering

Paul had a project which had started with the Corinthians. The plan was to gather money to take to believers in Jerusalem. The Macedonian churches were doing well at gathering funds and he urged them to give what they could without leaving themselves too little. It was a way to prove their love was real.

Jesus and Paul lived with practically nothing and Jesus famously urged a young man to sell all he had and give to the poor. Dispossession would take him beyond commands to deep love. He could not do it.

There are many opportunities for giving that can help us show that our love is real. We also need to take note that Paul wanted there to be equality between giver and receiver. There are such enormous wealth gaps that this is a challenging aspiration.

*Am I generous out of a loving heart?*

June 21

II Corinthians 8:16-24 Friends

Paul had originally planned to send Timothy to Corinth but it was Titus who went. Titus loved the Corinthians, and now that he was to return, two others were coming with him. They would form a team to take funds to Jerusalem. This might have been Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica. (Acts 20:4). Titus did not end up going to Jerusalem and perhaps took another assignment from Paul. Later Paul would send him to Crete.

Jesus depended on teams to expand his ministry. He sent the 72 out in pairs. As he trained them he told them to pray for harvest workers to be multiplied. (Luke 10:1.2). Paul and friends kept the multiplication going.

We also need to be part of teams that keep the multiplication going. We can keep one another accountable and above suspicion in regard to money as was the case here. Plus we can help one another with discernment and wise decisions.

*Am I a good co-worker in a ministry team?*

June 22

II Corinthians 9:1-5 Gift for Jerusalem

Paul seemed uneasy that the Corinthians were not going to follow through on their promised giving. He challenged them to step up so he would not be ashamed.

Jesus told a story of empty promises. One brother said he would work and did not. The other made no promise, but did so after all.

We can apply this to our tendencies to over-promise. We may have good intentions about giving or prayer or service or fasting and do not do it. We need to follow through.

*Do I do what I say I will do?*



June 23

II Corinthians 9:6-15 True generosity

Paul mentioned that they excelled in so many ways and he wanted them to excel in the gracious gift of giving. Generosity from a cheerful heart will be met by God's generosity to us and to have enough to give to others.

Jesus focused attention on not being ostentatious in giving to get admiration. God sees what we do in secret and will reward us openly.

Thanksgiving as we give and receive helps make us the cheerful, good-hearted people God wants us to be. If we learn to give, our chances to give will keep growing.

*Do I give privately and cheerfully?*

June 24

II Corinthians 10:1-11 Spiritual authority

Paul explained that they misinterpreted him if they thought he was timid in person, but bold in letters. He explained that his motives were to wage spiritual war against Satan's strongholds. These are the spiritual weapons he will describe in more detail in Ephesians 6: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, scripture, and prayer.

Jesus used his spiritual authority to command demonic forces to let go of people and be thrown out of their lives. This mark of authority was so strong that his enemies accused him of being in an alliance with Satan. But quite the opposite was true. He expects us to follow the example of Paul and use spiritual weapons to have a spiritual effect.

As C.S. Lewis wrote: "Enemy-occupied territory--that is what this world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage. When you go to church you are really listening in to the secret wireless from our friends: that is why the enemy is so anxious to prevent us from going." (Mere Christianity, p. 33)

*Am I using spiritual weapons to retake enemy territory?*

June 25

II Corinthians 10:12-18 True authority

Paul sounded downright insecure in saying he wouldn't claim to be as wonderful as others. But he offered good principles to help us with ministry insecurity: 1) stay within the boundaries of

God's plan for you, 2) don't claim credit for others' work, and 3) don't boast, but look for God's commendations.

Even Jesus spoke of boundaries for his ministry. He said he was not sent to the Gentiles but to the lost sheep of Israel. He did serve others as needed, but he kept his focus.

This helps me when I am tempted to look at someone else and think their ministry is so much more effective than anything I am doing. I wonder if I am not doing things right. I am comforted if I turn to God and check in whether I am doing what he wants.

*Am I staying in God's boundaries for me?*

June 26

II Corinthians 11:1-15 True apostleship

There is a lot about money and ministry in this book. Paul was competing with people in ministry for the money, teaching different doctrines. Paul pointed out that he never depended on them financially. His ministry was a disinterested gift. These other men might be more eloquent, but Paul had the right message.

In many places Paul followed the ministry model Jesus gave to the 72. He stayed in peoples' homes. For some reason Corinth was different. He worked as a tentmaker and relied on gifts from generous Philippi.

What Paul did has become our standard practice for missions and people preach and work in other countries with support from friends at home. Or they find an international job that makes ministry possible. Keeping ministry as a gift makes sense.

*Do I separate ministry from financial considerations? Am I generous to those in missions?*

June 27

II Corinthians 11:16-33 Trials

If any of us are having a bad day and feel sorry for ourselves, this passage is a bracing antidote. Paul was being criticized so much he felt the need to prove he was as good as others. But then he turned to where he really outdid everyone: his sufferings.

He had been jailed, whipped, near death, gotten 39 lashes five times, been beaten with rods three times, was stoned, shipwrecked three times, adrift at sea overnight, walked many miles, had gone through flooded rivers, encountered robbers, faced danger, weariness, pain, sleeplessness, hunger, thirst, being without food, cold, without sufficient clothes, concerned and feeling for everyone else's problems, and he had to get out of town in a basket! If this was

written in about 57 AD at the start of Acts 20:1 we know that his long-term imprisonment was coming up and he would go through another shipwreck. And Acts was not even the end of his life!

Paul was truly an adventurer. For most of us, what concerns us is much smaller in comparison. Jesus told us to take up our crosses and to be willing to lose our lives. Paul's example puts my troubles in perspective and helps them loom less large. Even my intense concern for other people is outweighed by his caring: "'Who is weak without my feeling that weakness? Who is led astray, and I do not burn with anger?'"

*Can I face suffering with more courage when I remember Paul?*

June 28

II Corinthians 12:1-10 Thorn in the flesh

In validating himself, Paul shared that he had a vision of heaven which he acknowledged was quite impressive. But instead of boasting in that, he boasted of a thorn God allowed him to suffer despite prayers for it to stop. We do not know if the thorn was all the opposition he faced. Or could it have been an ailment resulting from one of his beatings, or shipwrecks, or times of going hungry? Whatever it was, he said he was grateful for it since his weakness allowed Christ's strength to flow through him.

Over and over Christ urged his disciples to be humble leaders who served others and took the lower position. Paul knew this and lived it. Others were trying to put him into the argument between the disciples about who was the greatest, but Paul knew that humility was right. "He that is least among you is the greatest" is what Jesus had said.

When we are left with unsolvable problems in our lives that we can identify as weaknesses, we are also in a situation where we can let God's strength flow through us. We are also in a situation to offer humble leadership that does not depend on our own strength.

*Am I willing to accept humbling things and let God's grace turn them to good?*

June 29

II Corinthians 12:11-21 Third visit

Paul worried that when he arrived he would see a display of sin: quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfishness, backstabbing, gossip, conceit, disorder, impurity, immorality, and lust. He felt accused of taking advantage of them in some way, despite his signs and wonders.

Jesus' signs and wonders were rejected also. The religious leaders exemplified so many of the fleshly sins Paul listed. They were spiritually unhealthy and worse yet, could not see it.

We know that works of the flesh are contrary to God's Kingdom, so we need to return to love if we see our community falling apart in this way.

*Is my community loving or is it showing these sins?*

June 30

II Corinthians 13:1-13 Test yourselves

Paul contrasted weakness and God's mighty power. The cross showed Christ weak, and the resurrection showed him in power. Paul said that he was weak in himself and powerful in God.

The incredible story of Christ is that God himself became weak enough to die a violent death by unjust people. The powerful life-giver and miracle worker was silenced. But his power changed everything, and we celebrate the mighty power of resurrection.

Like Paul, we are weak people. But God who is strong intervenes for us. He puts the power of the Spirit in us. It is just realistic to recognize that life is beyond us and to ask for his help.

*Do I experience God's power overcoming my weakness?*