

## GALATIANS: CHRIST, OUR LIBERATOR

July 1

Galatians 1:1-10 Guarding truth

Some think this was Paul's first letter written in about 47-8 AD right after his first missionary journey. Others think that it was written about ten years later when he wrote to the Corinthians and Romans after leaving Ephesus when his three years there ended in a riot. But all agree it was written to counter those trying to turn Gentile believers into Jews.

It seems that the scrupulous Phariseeism that was such a competitor with Jesus, continued and was Paul's competitor as well. The root of the problem was the idea that following the right rules makes us right with God, something that the Old Testament did not teach. Jesus reserved his harshest words for the Pharisees, and Paul reserved his harshest language for these teachers who were introducing legalism to people who had responded to God's mercy.

Today we still often give too much importance to our culture and our ideas of what good behavior is. We judge, we legislate, we advocate, and we try to impose our will on others. Paul and Jesus told us to step into a perspective that puts love first.

*Am I harsh with those who don't live up to my standards?*

July 2

Galatians 1:11-24 Given by Christ

Paul wanted the Galatians to understand that he was not only an apostle because of God's direct call, but his preaching was based on direct revelation from Jesus. To make his case he gives details of his bio we don't get elsewhere.

After conversion he went to Arabia, then Damascus, and only after three years did he have a 15-day visit with Peter in Jerusalem. He went to his hometown of Tarsus in Cilicia, and we learn from Acts 11 that Barnabas went and got him and took him to Antioch in Syria.

His point is that his message is from the inner authority that comes from direct communication from God. Jesus, when his authority was challenged, repeatedly gave the same answer that he was passing on what he had heard from the Father. It is also a good model for us. No matter how we were brought to faith or who taught us, at some point the message must become our own, based on our own interior connection to God. From this deep personal place, we can be bold like Paul.

*Have I internalized my faith?*

July 3

Galatians 2:1-10 Gentiles challenged

In Acts we learn that Paul and Barnabas took a gift to Jerusalem for famine relief after a year of working together in Antioch. (Acts 11). They may have been there for James' execution and Peter's imprisonment (Acts 12). They were then commissioned by the Antioch church for a missionary journey (Acts 13-14).

Back in Antioch they were harassed about how much Gentile Christians were adapting to Judaism, and went to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles. The result was a Church Council which said Gentiles should avoid idol worship, immorality, and badly slaughtered animals. At the council Paul was affirmed in the way he had been teaching Gentiles (Acts 15).

Paul said that the reputations of these leaders made no difference to him because God does not have favorites. This is consonant with Jesus' example of leadership and exhortation to the disciples that we should not seek a high position, but should seek to be servants. Both Jesus and Paul emphasized that the Holy Spirit can speak directly to each one of us. This results in a mature, self-directed faith that is not overly dependent on pleasing or impressing others.

*Am I anxious to impress, or do I have a confident, but humble, attitude?*

July 4

Galatians 2:11-21 Gentiles and Jews

Peter was the first apostle to preach to Gentiles when called to Cornelius' house. It was hard for him to break the boundaries since he was so schooled to think that "we" are better than "them". God helped him with a vision and a message to go. (Acts 10). But perhaps it was easy to revert to his natural Judaism, and to be respectful of more scrupulous Jews (defined here as friends of James). This set a bad tone, and Paul felt he had to confront this, saying that Peter knew better. He knew Gentiles were equal to Jews, and that Jesus made all right before him by faith.

Peter did know better. He later went and preached to Gentiles in eastern and northern Turkey, in Italy and elsewhere. He listened to Paul and acknowledged the correction as we can see from his letters to Gentiles which made no issue regarding Jewishness.

Today our "us" and "them" may be based on nationality, race, economics, religion, political views, respectability, or sexuality. But we still need to have an open table and be like Jesus. If we fail in open hospitality, as Peter did at this moment, we can change as he did and eat with all.

*Is mine an open table?*

July 5

Galatians 3:1-14 Grace

To combat teachers who wanted Gentile Christians to obey the Jewish law, Paul used a tactic he would later repeat in Romans. He said the law came 430 years after Abraham, so the promises and faith exemplified in Abraham have a greater priority than Mosaic law. Secondly, Abraham's faith came before he was circumcised, showing that faith has priority over that ritual. And thirdly, the promise to Abraham included Gentiles since all would be blessed through him.

The law included curses for those who disobeyed it, and in the story of the Old Testament those curses are played out. But those consequences of disobedience are irrelevant to us who believe in Christ because he took the curse on himself, and gave us blessing.

We could interpret this to mean that Christ appeased God's anger. But if we remember that Christ is God, that looks different. Consequences God pointed out for sin, such as death, he took on himself and gave us mercy. God took all curses on himself.

Verse 13 uses the word "redeem" which more literally means being out of the slave market. We have been liberated from slavery to sin by Christ's redemptive payment. We do not need to become perfect by our own efforts, but we need to let our new freedom as God's spiritual children do the work.

*Is there anything to which I am a slave? Am I trusting Christ to set me free?*

July 6

Galatians 3:15-29 Guilt

Paul explained that Christ's primacy over the law was inherent in the promise to Abraham. His child, Isaac, foreshadowed Christ, and did not include Abraham's other children. The law was like a guardian and teacher to help people grow up until Christ came. Once in Christ, the law's custody was no longer needed. Now in Christ there is no distinction between cultures, genders, or social classes. We are one.

Jesus had an interesting approach to teaching about the law. In the Sermon on the Mount he said, "You have heard it said..." and would repeat a command from the law. He would then say, "But I say..." and would press for deeper spiritual reality behind the command.

With Jesus' standards higher than the law, we need his help and the ongoing transformation of the Spirit. We become children of the spiritual promise, and a supernatural new nature makes

us change. Where we are aware of sin and weakness we continue to repent and receive new life.

*Is the fruit of God's nature emerging in my life?*

July 7

Galatians 4:1-7 Made free

Paul said that Jesus came to buy our freedom from spiritual powers. He came to buy our freedom from the law. He came to adopt us as his children so we can call him Father and inherit all he has to give us.

Paul loved the metaphor of purchasing freedom, one that is embedded in the Exodus story. Jesus enacted the Exodus story by his Passover death and his resurrection. Though he never told a parable using the metaphor of purchase, he was the lamb that purchased our freedom. He taught us to call God our Father and see ourselves as his brothers and sisters.

But am I free? Am I enslaved to food? To social media? To work? To anger? To the needs of others? Paul will give us a list of enslaving things in Galatians 5 and say they prevent us from inheriting the Kingdom. We find it almost impossible to change besetting sins on our own and need to turn to the Spirit to free us from whatever area of life is still not free.

*To what am I enslaved?*

July 8

Galatians 4:8-20 Going backwards

Don't go back to slavery, wrote Paul. Christ did not make us free to follow new rules. Paul, a Jew, chose to live as a Gentile. Why should Gentiles try to live as Jews? The reality was new life in Christ. He recalled their kindness to him in illness and urged them to keep that close relationship.

Jesus also pointed out that it was not by following food laws, sacrifices, washing hands, or keeping the Sabbath that people pleased God. Instead it was a matter of a changed heart, new life, living in the light with him, living in the freedom that is him and his truth.

Our lives are to be lived in freedom. I can get tangled up in spiritual practices that are good, such as prayer, serving, giving, studying, etc. But if I become anxious in any of these things it is a wake-up call that I am trying to control things beyond my ability to control. To relax is another word for freedom!

*Am I relaxed in my relationship with God?*

July 9

Galatians 4:21-31 Two covenants

Paul used a literary analogy from the Old Testament to describe the relationship between the law and the kingdom. Hagar and her son Ishmael were an afterthought when Sarah was childless. Then the promised son Isaac was born. Those who were in faith were children of the promise (analogous to Isaac) and were being taunted by the Jews (analogous to Ishmael's taunts). But Isaac had the better situation and they would also. The analogy of an ancestor to the Arabs being compared to Jewish teachers shows how flexible analogies can be. Another analogy could have been to see Hagar, the first to see the angel of the Lord, as an archetype of all non-Jewish believers.

Jesus told many stories where the point could only be discovered by understanding the analogies. We call them parables, but they could also be called symbolic short stories. It is remarkable how many of the Old Testament stories lend themselves to finding analogies to Christ's life. For example, Isaac, the son of the promise, "died" and was resurrected.

I explored the analogies and many cases of foreshadowing of Christ in the Old Testament which is available as a devotional. The result was to have a much deeper appreciation of how all the history prepared for Christ in large and small ways. Very beautiful.

*Do I feel comfortable finding analogies between Old and New Testaments?*

July 10

Galatians 5:1-15 Freedom

Paul urged them to let go of any sense of obligation to fulfill any part of the law. It had been fulfilled in Christ, and now they were to live in the Spirit and in love. This freedom allowed them to love. Christ completed the law and now took it even further through love.

He recalled Jesus' explanation that the law is summed up by love for neighbor. He gave Jesus' exhortation to serve one another in love, echoing Jesus' many exhortations to serve as well as his example in washing their feet. We can resolve the difference of Jesus pointing out that the two great commandments were to love God and love neighbor with Paul's statement that the law is summed up by one command, to love our neighbor. John wrote that if we don't love those who we can see, then we cannot love the unseen God. (1 John 4:20)

The exhortation to love resolved the trap that the Galatians (and we) could fall into that they needed to meet rules and standards. Love causes us to go far beyond the rules and to do more than the minimum.

*Do I feel free? Am I willing to serve others in humble ways to show love?*

July 11

Galatians 5:16-21 Works of the Flesh

Paul urged them (and us) to walk in the Spirit and so avoid the fleshly sins. One connotation of the Greek used for "walk" is "stroll" which invites images of a leisurely, comfortable, and appreciative journey where dangerous detours are not even attractive.

Rick Renner explored the Greek for the works of the flesh and all are worth studying. Lasciviousness, for example, can refer to excessive consumption of any kind, including food. I did not know this! The word for witchcraft is not only sorcery, but is the root for drugs. Party spirit can mean ugly politics. With our epidemics of obesity, opioids, and political sniping our whole society shows the flesh in control. All the sins are destructive. (Sparkling Gems I, p 489-517)

Jesus offered his own list of destructive behavior that comes from a heart with the wrong focus: evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft lying and slander (Matthew 15:19). He offered the Holy Spirit to bring us into the qualities he desired that are characteristic of Kingdom people. If we use the list for a careful self-examination, it can be an occasion to repent and ask for change and grace.

*Am I living directed by the Spirit?*

July 12

Galatians 5:22-26 Gifts of the Spirit

Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit helps us know to what we must aspire. It is not enough to avoid the bad, we need the positive good. Different translations try to capture the meanings of the original words.

NLT	Way	Philips	Passion
love	love	love	divine love
joy	gladness	joy	joy that overflows
peace	heart-peace	peace	peace that subdues
patience	forbearance	patience	patience that endures
kindness	kindness	kindness	kindness in action
goodness	benevolence	generosity	a life full of virtue
faithfulness	trustfulness	fidelity	faith that prevails
gentleness	gentleness	tolerance	gentleness of heart
self-control	self-control	self-control	strength of spirit

Jesus' interesting personality showed these qualities in action. The promise is that our unique personalities can show them as well. Jesus, the Spirit and the Word are seen planted in us. Since seeds give only the fruit they are from, we will naturally grow into these things.

Checking my weak spots against this, I ask for more growth.

*Am I following the Spirit in every part of my life?*

July 13

Galatians 6:1-10 Meaning of the Cross

Paul urged us to do good and included in the list of ideas is that of helping others who are pressed down by life. Jesus showed us many examples of lifting others' burdens: healing the sick, feeding the hungry, supplying wine for a wedding, calming storms and fears, giving a grieving family their brother back, listening to a troubled woman, answering questions from spiritual seekers, freeing people from mental illnesses, forgiving sins, and many more things.

How does bearing burdens and doing good to others look in my life? It can be showing hospitality, listening to the struggles of others, giving something to someone in need, loaning some money, caring for someone who is ill, praying for others, sharing an encouraging word online, and many more things. The opportunities to do good are unending.

*Am I bearing burdens for others?*

July 14

Galatians 6:11-18 Grace

Paul concluded by saying that what matters most is the cross of Christ. What matters is not externals like circumcision, but whether we are new and different people. Newness of life was expressed by Jesus as the opportunity to be "born again". Not to be born in any earthly way, but to be born of God's Spirit. New heavenly life from Christ gives us new natures.

C.S. Lewis expressed what Christ has done for us like this: "What, then, is the difference which He has made to the whole human mass? It is just this; that the business of becoming a son of God, of being turned from a created thing into a begotten thing, of passing over from the temporary biological life into timeless 'spiritual' life, has been done for us. Humanity is already 'saved' in principle. We individuals have to appropriate that salvation. But the really tough work--the bit we could not have done for ourselves--has been done for us. We have not got to try to climb up into spiritual life by our own efforts; it has already come down into the human race. If we will only lay ourselves open to the one Man in whom it was fully present, and who, in spite of being God, is also a real man, He will do it in us and for us." (Mere Christianity, p. 98)

*Do I understand what the cross has done for me?*

EPHESIANS: CHRIST, RULER OF ALL

July 15

Ephesians 1:1-5 Children of God

This beautiful epistle was written while Paul was under house arrest in Rome. We recall that Priscilla and Aquila had been in the church there, that Paul had brought twelve men the message of the Holy Spirit. We recall that the new Christians posed enough of a threat to the idol manufacturers to cause a riot.

But now, years later, in chains, he wrote an encouraging letter which presented Christ as ruler of all things. He emphasized our spiritual blessings, God's choosing us to be without fault, and our adoption into God's family. We remember that Jesus prayed to the Father and repeatedly emphasized that those who follow him are his family. We have a new identity from this adoption, and like any human parent who adopts, God is filled with pleasure to have us.

*Do I feel God's pleasure that I am in his family?*

July 16

Ephesians 1:6-14 Chosen by God

There are lavish gifts for us as Christians. This passage is almost too rich to absorb. There is the richness of God's gifts: his rich kindness, an inheritance for us, the gift of the Spirit, and all his promises. We heard about these gifts from Jesus: forgiveness, the Spirit, becoming God's people.

At the end of his life Jesus said, "I have been given complete authority on heaven and on earth." (Matthew 28:18). Paul said that at the right time all things will come under Christ's authority. The intimacy of his care for each one of us and his vast control of all things provokes wonder and worship.

Paul says that God chose us from the beginning. This is mysterious and beautiful. It has been distorted at times to mean that some are not chosen, but all it says is that we who have come to trust in Christ have been chosen to raise him, be saved, and to be purchased. Just as the chosen people were chosen to be a blessing to all people, this is also our calling. We know he is calling all people.

*Do I worship Christ as Lord of all?*



July 17

Ephesians 1:15-18 Constant prayer

Paul shared his prayer for the Ephesians. It included thanksgiving for them, and asked that they will have spiritual wisdom and understanding and grow in knowledge of God. He wanted them to have hearts flooded with light to be open to the amazing and beautiful realities ahead, a wonderful future, a great inheritance.

Jesus' conversation with his disciples about that future put it in terms of our adoption into God's family. "There are many rooms in my Father's house, and I am going to prepare a place for you." (John 14:2). We know he is ruler of all, and the imagery is that we, now his children, have a room in the palace.

We can pray these astonishing things for ourselves and others we know. How Paul was able to pray constantly is a challenge to those of us who do well to pray sporadically. And what a prayer!

*Do I pray constantly?*

July 18

Ephesians 1:19-23 Complete authority

As Paul continued his prayer, he focused on God's power that raised Christ from the dead and the authority he has at God's right hand. He mentioned Christ's universal authority at the beginning of the chapter. He now focused on that truth, emphasizing the infinite nature of Christ's authority.

Christ came sharing that he was bringing a new kingdom. People supposed that meant that he was restoring kingly power to Israel and overthrowing Roman control. After the resurrection, the disciples began to understand that his kingdom which is not of this world, was a spiritual force that they could help extend. But Paul had grasped that the kingdom means that Christ is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. There is nothing that is not under his rulership.

The small troubles I have, my concerns and fears, look different against the backdrop of Christ's power, his rulership over all. His is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever, and in that I can rest.

*Do I praise Christ for his great power and authority?*

July 19

Ephesians 2:1-10 Claiming our place

Paul made a startling claim. Because we are one with Christ, we were raised from the dead when Christ was raised, and we are now seated with him in heaven. This is hard to grasp. It is much easier to grasp that we were dead and doomed and under the control of an evil prince.

Paul gives us insight into what it means for us to be in God's kingdom. We were rescued from a death-dealing tyrant, and now live in the life-giving and safe home of God. As I think about what being identified with Christ's resurrection and ascension means on a day to day level, it is encouraging. We have just been given a glimpse of Christ's power and authority in the previous chapter, and now we are told we are right there next to it all. It makes our challenges seem much smaller.

He concluded with the beautiful image that we are God's masterpiece. The root word is the same for "poem.". As someone who loves poetry, I am touched to be considered one of his carefully and beautifully constructed pieces.

*Do I praise God for my new and powerful identity?*

July 20

Ephesians 2:11-22 Complete unity

Paul was in prison when he wrote this because of his loyalty to Gentiles. He wrote that Gentiles were excluded from God's people, without hope, but now, in Christ are included. Christ has made all people one. Our diversity of national and ethnic identities are brought together, not in a worldly empire like that of Rome which had imprisoned Paul, but in God's kingdom.

Paul said that Christ's death had ended the law, and we know from elsewhere in his writings that he valued the law highly. But Christ's death and resurrection fulfilled all the prophecies, promises, imagery and Messianic expectations of the whole Old Testament.

Christ began his ministry angering his hometown by pointing out God's love for Gentiles in the Old Testament (Luke 4:25-28). He served many Gentiles in his ministry and often commented on the strength of their faith. His parables increasingly included warnings that has the Jewish people rejected him, others would be brought in to replace them as God's people. He ended his ministry by telling the disciples to preach to all people. His promises are for all.

*Do I see the beauty and complexity of God's plan for how to bring all people to himself?*

July 21

Ephesians 2:19-22 Constructed together

The Jews took particular pride in God's presence with them on earth in the temple. Paul was arrested because he was falsely accused of desecrating the temple by taking a Gentile friend inside. Now he wrote that everything had been changed.

Even though a few more years remained until the physical temple would be destroyed, he said the real temple is now all of God's people, Jews and Gentiles alike. Jesus had identified himself as the temple and quoted a Psalm which identified himself as the cornerstone. (Luke 20:17) Paul now said that Jesus laid a foundation of the apostles and prophets. We're now part of that building.

*Do I see the beauty of the building God has built?*

July 22

Ephesians 3:1-13 A secret plan

Paul started by saying he was a prisoner for preaching to the Gentiles. This was literally true; he had been arrested in Jerusalem for this, and was in prison in Rome awaiting trial as he wrote this.

The book of Acts told a wonderful story of how Peter realized Gentiles could believe in Jesus. It told us how Paul went from persecutor to preacher and was given a particular calling to the Gentiles. The apostles in their council realized Gentiles did not have to become Jewish before becoming followers of Christ.

Paul delighted in the special joy of his calling to preach to Gentiles. Before Jesus ascended, the apostles did not realize God would call all people. But this had always been the plan, and Jesus helped them understand this. All can now come fearlessly into God's presence because of Jesus. He spent his three years of ministry demonstrating that all are welcome, not those already believing in the one true God.

*Am I extending God's glad welcome to everyone I know?*

July 23

Ephesians 3:14-21 Paul's prayer

Jesus told us "I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love." (John 15:9). Paul prayed that they would understand God's great love for us. Every line of this prayer is so beautiful and helpful, that divided into 30 lines, it can provide a meditation for each day of the month.

1-When I think of the wisdom and scope of God's plan, 2-I fall to my knees 3-and pray to the Father. 4-The Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. 5-I pray that from his glorious,

unlimited resources 6-he will give you mighty inner strength 7-through his Holy Spirit. 8-And I pray that Christ will be more and more at home in your hearts 9-as you trust in Him. 10-May your roots go down deep 11-into the soil of God's marvelous love. 12-And may you have the power to understand 13-as all God's people should 14-how wide 15-how long 16-how high 17-and how deep 18-his love really is. 19-May you experience the love of Christ 20-though it is so great you will never fully understand it. 21-Then you will be filled 22-with the fullness of life and power 23-that comes from God. 24-Now glory be to God 25-by his mighty power at work within us 26-he is able to accomplish more 27-than we would ever dare to ask or hope. 28-May he be given glory in the church 29-and in Jesus Christ 30-forever and ever through endless ages. 31-Amen

*Do I glimpse God's love for me?*

July 24

Ephesians 4:1-6 Humility and unity

Paul called for unity between believers, and the humility that makes that possible. Jesus prayed also for unity: "My prayer for all of them is that they will be one, just as you and I are one, Father--that just as you are in me and I am in you, so they will be in us, and the world will believe you sent me." (John 17:21)

This has been hard for the church, and we have multiple denominations as a result. We need the qualities Paul calls for--humility, patience, overlooking faults--to make this possible.

C.S. Lewis beautifully wrote in regard to what we all have in common and labeled it mere Christianity: "It is more like a hall out of which doors open into several rooms. If I can bring anyone into that hall I shall have done what I attempted. But it is in the rooms, not in the hall, that there are fires and chairs and meals. The hall is a place to wait in, a place from which to try the various doors, not a place to live in. For that purpose the worst of the rooms (whichever that may be) is, I think, preferable. .... When you have reached your own room, be kind to those who have chosen different doors and to those who are still in the hall. If they are wrong they need your prayers all the more; and if they are your enemies, then you are under orders to pray for them. That is one of the rules common to the whole house." (Mere Christianity, page 8)

*Do I pray for and work at unity with all believers?*

July 25

Ephesians 4:7-16 Gifted

Having given us a breathtaking vision of Christ ruling for all creation, Paul quoted a Psalm that predicted the ascension, and Christ's liberation of mankind. He drew the lesson that to ascend implies that Christ came down to our lowly world, but that now his rule fills the universe.

Because the Psalm mentioned gifts coming from Christ on high, he turned to what these gifts might be. He said they are the people who establish the church and build it into good health. We recognize some of these roles from the Old Testament: prophets who preach, warn, and predict; priests who guide, heal, and forgive as pastors; and teachers who wrote wisdom literature or explicated the scriptures like Ezra.

Christ fulfilled all of these roles. In the Old Testament the messengers were angels, and though they continue working, Christ also sent out human messengers: apostles and evangelists. From his position reigning over all, he sends people with these skills as his agents which makes us see them not as jobs, but as his agents for change.

*Do I see the value of spiritual leadership?*

July 26

Ephesians 4:17-32 Full grown

We are called to have the new nature of Christ's life living through us. One of the transformational aspects of this new nature is a new way of approaching anger. Anger, like fear, or disgust, or surprise, or delight are natural responses to things in our experience; there even seem to be universal facial expressions associated with them, which makes it seem to be part of our biological nature. How we manage and express feelings is related to how we were nurtured, and as new creatures in Christ there are new ways.

Paul said not to sin by letting anger control us, not to speak abusively not to be bitter or full of rage, anger, harsh words, slander and malice. One strategy is to be quick to forgive. Jesus warned us to forgive, seek reconciliation, and show love rather than express anger or contempt. (Matthew 5:21-26). We are reminded also that Jesus had flashes of anger at his uncompassionate critics, and did the right thing anyway. (Mark 3:5).

Our feelings of anger can alert us that there is a problem and that some kind of action is needed. The new nature in us can help us decide what a wise response might be.

*Do I use anger wisely?*

July 27

Ephesians 5:1-14 Perfume poured out

Paul took up Jesus' great themes of the Kingdom of Heaven, love, light, and a life detached from material things. He made a helpful connection between greed and idolatry. Knowing that idolatry was the great sin that bedeviled Old Testament people and was part of the culture of Ephesus, he added to their understanding by focusing on materialism. For us too, our culture works to make us "worship the things of the world."

There is a comparison between Jesus' sacrifice and sweet perfume. This can beautifully expand our understanding of the cross as not only a willing offering from God (Jesus) to God (the Father). We are reminded of the sweet perfume with which Mary anointed Jesus when he made a link to his coming burial. We are also reminded of the spices the woman took to the tomb, supposing they would anoint him.

But it also takes us back to the exposition of the first few chapters of Leviticus where sacrifices are repeatedly said to be very pleasing to the Lord. Jesus brought his Kingdom of love and light by means of his own sacrifice of sweet perfume.

*Can I see Jesus' death as sweet perfume?*

July 28

Ephesians 5:15-20 Filled with the Spirit

We can take each line of this wise advice from Paul and see how it parallels Jesus' teaching.

So be careful how you live, not as fools but as those who are wise.

*Anyone who listens to my teaching and obeys me is wise, like a person who builds a house on solid rock. (Matthew 7:24-27)*

Make the most of every opportunity for doing good in these evil days.

*Do for others what you would like them to do for you. (Matthew 7:12)*

Don't act thoughtlessly, but try to understand what the Lord wants you to do.

*The decisive issue is whether they obey my Father in heaven. (Matthew 7:21)*

Don't be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, let the Holy Spirit fill and control you.

*When he said "living water", he was speaking of the Spirit, who would be given to everyone believing in him. (John 7:39)*

Then you will sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, making music to the Lord in your hearts.

*Then they sang a hymn and went out to the Mount of Olives. (Matthew 26:30)*

And you will always give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

*Then Jesus was filled with the joy of the Holy Spirit and said, "O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, thank you for hiding the truth from those who think themselves so wise and clever, and for revealing it to the childlike." (Luke*

10:21)

*Am I committed to the wisdom, goodness, joy, and thankfulness that God wants in my life?*

July 29

Ephesians 5:21-33 The bridegroom

Paul gave a beautiful and elevated image of marriage by comparing it to the relationship between Christ and the church. Christ, in answering a query about why his disciples did not fast, said it was because he was the bridegroom who was with them, so it was a time for celebration. He also told a story of bridesmaids patiently waiting for the bridegroom which was him.

Given this loving imagery, our ideas about marriage are elevated. We can see Christ in a husband, a purified bride in the wife. This gives us reverence and romance in our relationships. Many fairy tales elaborate this image, and we enjoy the beauty in them. The prince and his princess make a good story, the gospel story always hovering around their edges.

*Do I see layers of significance in marriage because of Paul's analogy that can help me treasure a spouse?*

July 30

Ephesians 6:1-9 Elevating the humble

In the social system of first century Rome, men were above women, rulers above the people, parents above children, and masters above slaves. Much as we may think we've progressed, there are signs we are still operating with this framework. Men are paid more than women. Famous leaders and celebrities are above the masses. Parents have legal responsibilities for their children. CEOs make as much as 300 times more than their average employee. There is what we could call wage slavery in our time.

So Paul's advice to children to obey parents might have been culturally normal. That there would be blessing for this and to tell fathers not to anger their children but guide them lovingly was something the Jews knew, but was new to Gentiles. He told slaves to be respectful and see their work as being for Christ. Working hard as Christ's slaves increased their dignity. They had the King of the Universe as a boss, and we can take the same attitude no matter what our employment situation.

Jesus upended cultural mores by showing such respect--exceptional attention and praise--for children. He healed a slave with as much care as anyone else. So our new social model is dignity for each person, something aspirational but important.

*Do I show respect to all people, no matter their social status?*

July 31

Ephesians 6:10-20 Armor of God

Paul spoke of being in chains, and surely was right near a Roman soldier much of the time. So when he turned to speak of our spiritual battle with authorities of the unseen world, it was logical to use the gear he could see to describe our unseen defenses and weapons: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, scripture, and prayer.

The competition sounds daunting: “mighty powers of darkness who rule this world” and “wicked spirits in the heavenly realms.”. In the gospels one of the most prominent aspects of Jesus’ ministry was freeing people from evil spiritual forces. They were freed from madness, muteness, and other diseases. Jesus said that in his name, his followers could also cast out devils. (Mark 16:17)

C.S. Lewis wrote the brilliant *Screwtape Letters* to describe the busy work of senior and junior tempters. Through his fiction we recognize temptations to which we are vulnerable. In his preface he wrote: “There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.” (*Screwtape Letters*, p. 125). May we find the right balance in our lives.

*Do I take seriously a need to be alert to and resistant to evil spiritual forces?*

August 1

Ephesians 6:21-24 A co-worker

It is good for us to pray that God will bring the right people into our lives and the lives of others. There are people we can bless and people who can bless us. In Paul’s case, he built a circle of co-workers just as Jesus had done. These disciples of his became apostles that he sent out.

Timothy seems to have been his right hand man, just as Jesus relied on Peter. Perhaps Luke was the especially close one, just as John was for Jesus. But Tychicus, mentioned here, is a good candidate for being among the closest three. When we make a list of Paul’s closest coworkers we come up with twelve, like Jesus: Timothy, Luke, Tychicus, Sopater, Aristarchus, Secundus, Gaius, Trophimus, Titus, Priscilla, Aquila, and Clement (see Philippians 4:3)

Tychicus was from Asia, perhaps Ephesus, and he was in the team of eight that left with Paul for Jerusalem (Acts 20:4). That he was with Paul in Rome means he traveled there to be with



him at some point. He not only was sent to deliver this letter, he was to deliver a letter to Colossae (Colossians 4:7). In both cases he was commissioned to report on how Paul was doing and to offer encouragement. When Paul wrote to Titus who was working in Crete, he sent Tychicus (Titus 3:12). During his final imprisonment, Paul sent Tychicus back to Ephesus (II Timothy 4:12)

We also need to give and receive, always engaging with co-workers in the faith.

*Do I value my Christian friends and co-workers?*

PHILIPPIANS: CHRIST, OUR JOY

August 2

Philippians 1:1-6 Joy in partnership

Philippians includes a salutation from Paul and Timothy, and since this was written during Paul's Roman imprisonment, it affirms how important Timothy's support was for Paul. Timothy was credited in earlier letters (I and II Thessalonians and II Corinthians) and now in three letters written from Rome (Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon).

As we recall, the Philippian church began with Lydia and others who met for prayer by a riverbank. After preaching, Paul and Silas were put in prison, converted the jailor and his family, and were released. (Acts 16). Now once again in prison, he wanted to send encouragement.

Joy and rejoice are used eighteen times in the book, and the first time was Paul's prayer with joy because he recalled them as such wonderful co-workers. Jesus expressed a similar joy when the 72 disciples returned from their work. They reported their experiences with joy and Jesus responded with joy. (Luke 10:17-21) We can also have the same joy with those with whom we are spreading the kingdom.

*Do I share joy with my co-workers?*

August 3

Philippians 1:7-11 Compassion

Paul wrote that the Philippians had a special place in his heart, and he longed for them. This book contained no scolding, just love and appreciation. The occasion of the letter was to thank them for a financial gift they had sent with Epaphroditus. (Philippians 4:18). He appreciated them and wanted good things for them.

Paul mentioned the blessings of God they shared when he was in prison and out. Perhaps the new believers were present when he and Silas were put in stocks, or perhaps he was thinking of the great festive meal together after the jailor and his family were converted.

He compared his love for them to Christ's tender compassion. That compassion is mentioned eight times in the gospels and resulted in healing, feeding the hungry, and drying a mother's tears by raising her son from the dead. He urged us to have compassion (Luke 6:26), and told the story of the Good Samaritan to demonstrate what compassion looks like.

*Do I share Jesus' compassion?*

August 4

Philippians 1:12-19

Paul made the remarkable claim that everything that had happened to him had helped to spread the good news. Rather than glumly focusing on his imprisonment and indulging in some self-pity, he focused on the positive results he could see: 1) Caesar's palace guard had heard about Christ, 2) other Christians were emboldened to share their faith, and 3) even some who felt they were competitors of Paul were working harder to preach.

Jesus also had the certainty that his destiny to confront the religious leaders to the point of death would result in good and was worth doing. He could see joy ahead (Hebrews 12:2) and kept his focus on that.

We have a chance to go through life with the same attitude. We can look at our difficulties and be discouraged, or we can focus on the positive by-products of our difficulties. This upbeat perspective does not ignore or falsify real trouble, it just looks at the bigger picture.

*Do I see positive things in difficult situations?*

August 5

Philippians 1:20-26 Privilege of suffering

At a guess we think Paul wrote this letter sometime between 60-62 AD. We don't know precisely how old he was, but he might have been in his 60s. He had lived through a lot of hardships, and his body had been through a lot of stress. Perhaps he was worn out and thought that heaven sounded very attractive. Or perhaps he was steeling himself for the possibility that his trial would go badly and he would be condemned to death.

Either living or dying had advantages, but he felt he had more to give and God might keep him alive. We think that is what happened, and he was released the following year. He was right: because of his release they could boast of what Christ did for him. He traveled perhaps another

five years before being arrested. We think he was arrested in 67 AD and executed the next year.

We think of how Jesus was executed as a relatively young man of 33. Rather than silencing him, his life cut short changed history. Death was not the end for him, for Paul or for us. We also can live with Paul's motto: "For to me, living is for Christ, and dying is even better."

*Do I live with so much hope that dying does not frighten me?*

August 6

Philippians 1:27-30 Citizens of heaven

Paul here used the beautiful phrase "citizens of heaven.". He used it once more in this book but not elsewhere. It elegantly extends the message of the call to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. When Jesus presented the kingdom in his parables, it was often gentle, quiet, and growing slowly. After his ascension the apostles emphasized that he was seated at God's right hand as a ruler with great authority. In Ephesians Paul shared a vision of Christ ruling over all the universe, and he repeated that in Philippians and Colossians.

Given Christ's great power, and given that we have been raised to new life and ascended with him, we now have great dignity with our citizenship in the most desirable country of all. We are to live worthily, unintimidated by enemies, and take suffering in stride as we fight against an evil kingdom. The heavenly one will win.

*Do I see myself as heaven's citizen?*

August 7

Philippians 2:1-11 Every knee will bow

After calling for us to have humble hearts and an interest in others Paul launched into a hymn that showed Christ's humility in becoming incarnate as a human being from his high position as God.

I have specific memories of moments when my theological understanding advanced. One is when I was about ten years old, enchanted with the tales of Narnia and disappointed that real life didn't measure up to that imaginary world. Suddenly, the Spirit must have opened my eyes to how vast and wonderful and beautiful creation actually is--full of enchantment. But even more astonishing was that the creator of all this wonder could have become an infant within his own creation.

Here we are introduced to that same astonishment, and then the further wonder that God bore the indignity of death as a criminal. But now Jesus has been raised to the highest heaven, has the highest name, and has the highest authority.

Perhaps a year later in my life this passage was the subject of a sermon. Normally, and perhaps like many young people from Christian families who attend church, sermons were dull and I did not often focus. But this one caught my attention and I realized Jesus was more remarkable than I had known. I have been trying to grasp the deep truth of this passage ever since.

*Do I see the wonder of the story of Jesus?*

August 8

Philippians 2:12-24 Joy in godliness

Paul encouraged us to let our lives shine brightly before others. He defined this as obeying God reverently, avoiding complaints or arguments, innocence, holding on to the word. Jesus used the same metaphor, identifying himself as the light of the world, and tell us us to be like lights set up to light a room. This shining light is a way others see good works and glorify God. He compared us to a city on a mountain, glowing for all to see. (Matthew 5:14-16)

One of those shining lights was Timothy and Paul praised him strongly. Perhaps Timothy was more willing to go through the stress of travel than others, but whatever the explanation, Paul saw him as particularly selfless. I wonder if Timothy felt some discomfort at being praised at the expense of other friends! Praising another to others is a great way of showing respect and inspiring respect. Paul's praise would have prepared them to receive Timothy with the same affection they had for Paul.

Paul expressed the hope he could visit them himself, and the tradition is that he was released and realized this hope. His human bonds were strong and help us see what love looks like in the practice of ministry.

*Do I shine in the darkness around me? Am I quick to praise others?*

August 9

Philippians 2:25-30 Suffering and grief

Epaphroditus, the messenger sent to Rome with the gift for Paul, had gotten sick, so sick Paul feared he would die. Fortunately, he recovered, and would be going home. Paul said his death would have been an unbearable sorrow for him.

Is this not true for us? The illness or death of those we love is deeply sorrowful, but a reprieve is deeply joyful. We remember Jesus' tears with Mary and Martha over the death of their brother Lazarus. But what joy they all felt when he was brought back to life.

Both Jesus and Paul's examples show us that our human grief over illness and death is not at all a contradiction to our faith and hope of resurrection. We are human beings who feel sadness when things are sad.

*Do I grieve over the suffering and death around me?*

August 10

Philippians 3:1-11 Hope in Christ

Paul once more encouraged them to receive the gift of joy from God. We also can encourage one another--for our own good--to live with the positive, grateful perspective that looks for whatever is good in any situation and give thanks. That will make us more aware of God's gifts, and bring joy.

After a warning to ignore any false teachers who might show up, he launched in to his resumé: circumcised, pure-blooded Jew, a strict Pharisee, perfect in fulfilling the law, and a persecutor of the church (which he supposed was guilty of blasphemy). But, he said, my resumé does not matter. Knowing Jesus and knowing the power of his resurrection matters so much more.

Jesus' resumé was even thinner: carpenter's assistant, penniless itinerant preacher, and captured and killed as a criminal. But, of course, it turns out that he has the highest position of all: Lord and Ruler of the Universe. Both Paul and Jesus should put any concerned we have about our achievements and curriculum vitae to rest; what matters most is our obedience and relationship to that living and powerful Lord.

*Do I know Christ and find my identity in him?*

August 11

Philippians 3:12-21 Joy in the goal

Paul shared the encouragement that he was still growing, not yet complete. He gave the helpful line that he was forgetting the past and pressing toward the future. We often interpret that to mean that he was forgetting his past sins and misdeeds. But by this point in his life he had been a Christian for about 25 years and had amazing ministry accomplishments to look back on. Perhaps he was saying that he did not rest on past successes, but kept pressing toward his future.

He urged them to pattern their lives after his and once again reminded them of their heavenly citizenship. Christ also told his disciples to “follow him” and invited people to enter the kingdom of heaven. Arthur Way saw these final verses as a poem:

The state whereof we are citizens has its being in the Heavens,  
Whence also we watch to see our Deliverer appear,  
Jesus, our Lord, the Messiah.  
He shall transform this body,  
The symbol of our present lowly state,  
Into the likeness of that body  
Which is the symbol of His glorious state.  
This shall He do by virtue of the power  
Whereby He is able also to subject all things to Him.

*Do I have a hopeful view of the future on earth and beyond?*

August 12

Philippians 4:1-9 Experiencing peace

Paul urged his listeners to rejoice, be considerate, and pray about things instead of worrying. He promised peace as a result of these practices. Some psychologists today research what habits and thoughts contribute to happiness. Apparently appreciation and gratitude are essential. These habits of mind create a baseline of contentment from which the ups and downs of life can be handled.

Paul told us that we should focus on positive things and appreciate them. Things that are true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and worthy of praise should fill our minds. For me the kindness of others, the outdoors, art in all its forms, laughter, amazing human talent, compassion in crisis, and the wisdom of talented teachers and researchers are among many positive things for which I can give thanks and which bring joy. I have even learn to look for what is admirable in our politics rather than solely keeping my attention on things that need to change. (Still allowed to pray for those things!)

Focusing on Jesus brings us joy since he fits all the criterion. His talent as a storyteller and his use of metaphors show his own tendencies to notice and focus on lovely things. His capacity for seeing the positive without ignoring the negative seems like a model to follow.

*Have I developed a habit of focusing on positive things?*

August 13

Philippians 4:10-23 Every need supplied

Paul thanked them for their gifts while also assuring them they did not need to worry about his finances. He modeled being content whether he had a little or had a lot. He thanked them for their (unique) past financial help for his missionary work. Perhaps Lydia, the successful businesswoman with whom Paul and his companions had lived has set a tone of generosity.

A trip from Philippi to Rome may have taken at least six weeks, and Epaphroditus had arrived with a gift Paul described as a sweet smelling sacrifice. In this passage we have the models of generous giving for ministry, and grateful contentment no matter what the state of finances, and confidence in God to supply our needs.

These are similar messages that Jesus gave about money. In his discourse in Matthew 6 on the subject, he urged us not to worry about our needs, but to put God first. When Jesus sent out his disciples to do ministry, he said not to worry about taking supplies, but to accept hospitality (as Paul had done in Philippi with Lydia). There is a lovely line in Luke 12:33 which says the "purses of heaven have no holes in them.

*Do I live contentedly, no matter my financial situation?*

#### COLOSSIANS: CHRIST, IMAGE OF GOD

August 14

Colossians 1:1-8 A prayer of thanksgiving

As Paul wrote this letter, we see how much he had internalized Jesus' instruction that leadership is best when done as a servant. He had not established the Colossian church, though perhaps he visited during the three years he was in Ephesus less than 100 miles away. The one who started the church, Epaphras, had arrived in Rome and was, like Paul, a prisoner. (Philemon 1:23)

He cared enough to write a letter of instruction. He cared enough to send Epaphras' greetings and let them know how concerned he was for them, and how he agonized in prayer for them. (Colossians 4:12). But he also cared enough to pray constantly for them himself. In Luke we have seven instances of Christ going apart for private prayer. But he also modeled that constant communion with God which is prayer and in John he spoke of only doing and saying what resulted from that communion.

Paul's prayer is a model for us in praying for other believers. It starts with thanksgiving. I have learned that if I have a concern, it is good to surround and embroider it with all there is for which to be thankful. It increases my faith and hope. And if we have friends like the people Paul describes, there is a great deal to be thankful for: that they trust Jesus, love God's people, look forward to heaven and have a changed life. Epaphras had told him of their great love.

*Do I pray thankfully for other believers in my life?*

August 15

Colossians 1:9-14 Living in light

Paul's prayer asked that God would give them understanding of what he wanted to do in their lives, and that he would make them spiritually wise. That would not only bring honor and praise to God, they would do good kind things for others, and learn to know God better. They will be strengthened, given endurance, and be filled with joy and thanksgiving. He concluded that they had been rescued from darkness and brought into the Kingdom where they lived in the light. They had been ransomed from the dark side by Christ's death.

This reminds us not only of all Jesus' references to the Kingdom in the synoptic gospels, but to the discourses on going from light to darkness in John. It reminds us that Jesus said "I am the light of the world.". The beauty visible to us through light, the fact that we can see our way, the wisdom brought by light, all these things are bound up with the prayer that we live in the light.

When praying for others, this is a good passage to pick up to give great ideas of what to ask for. It amplifies "thy will be done" from the Lord's prayer, since these are specifics on God's will for us. This is a joyful prayer.

*Do I delighted to ask that God's will be done in the lives of those I know?*

August 16

Colossians 1:15-29 Lord of all

Verses 15-20 are widely seen as an early Christian hymn that Paul was quoting, or perhaps even one he composed. It celebrated Christ as lord of all, creator, God himself, and resurrected Lord of the church. Here is my version which draws on the verses that follow as well.

Christ, who is God's portrait, made it all,  
What we see and what we cannot see,  
All power, rule and all authority,  
All is for him whether great or small.  
In him, the one, all becomes one whole.  
Before it all, he makes all complete.  
First in all, he dealt death's defeat.  
High over all, he is God, the goal.  
He returns to himself the earth,  
And brings all the universe to peace.  
His violent death made all violence cease,  
And restored to us our flawless worth.



This awesome one is now within our heart  
Making us God's portrait through his art.

After giving us an awe-inspiring vision of who Christ is, Paul went on to say that the great mystery is that this one who is so very great now lives in us. This is a mystical vision of hope and glory that doubtless eludes us in our everyday life, but is a vision to which we need to continually return.

*Do I worship Christ as the image of the invisible God?*

August 17  
Colossians 2:1-10 Hidden treasure

Apparently, having a strong faith does not mean that there are not times of emotional agony in prayer--Paul mentions this, and later in the book he will write of their leader Epaphras' agonized prayers (Colossians 4:13). We also think of Jesus' agonized prayers in Gethsemane. But the agony is temporary, and the bottom line is that he was happy because of their faith.

Paul then used a metaphor that was pervasive in the Old Testament, in Jesus' parables, and in his own writings: that of being like a plant deeply rooted in Christ. We think of Psalm 1 with the imagery of being like trees planted by the river that bring forth fruit. We think of Jesus' exhortation that we let the seed of God's word grow in us so that we give abundant fruit. And we think of Ephesians where Paul said we are to let our lives go deep into the soil of God's love.

One result is lives that overflow with gratitude. Another is staying on the path of truth. Yet another is to be complete in our union with the one who is ruler of all. In him are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. With all these resources I wonder why so many of us spend too much time feeling incomplete, anxious, thinking that surely our lives will be more complete if x, y, or z happens. The concept of being complete challenges me to pause and think about being "in union" with the ruler of the universe when I am distressed that something I wish for has not yet happened.

*Do I realize that Christ is my hidden treasure?*

August 18  
Colossians 2:11-23

Paul corrected both Jewish and Gentile ideas that might lead the Colossians astray. In Christ they had the reality of which circumcision, Jewish festivals, and Sabbath were the image. They did not need to follow rules about food because holiness came from inside, not out. Jesus had said the Law was not cancelled, it was fulfilled, (Matthew 5:17-19) and Paul fully understood that the law was completed in Jesus.

Some taught that angels were to be worshipped. We do not know for sure what their religious tradition was, but in the Persian period Colossae had been a large city on a trade route. Perhaps there were vestiges of the Persian religion, Zoroastrianism, which had six guardian angels and over 50 additional angels which deserved worship. They were created by a good being, but an evil being created equivalent evil for each good and they were at war until the end. Paul said none of this reference for angels was necessary.

Paul brought the good news that Jesus defeated all evil spiritual forces by his victory on the cross. Evil was overcome and we have been set free. We can fall into similar errors and depend on our rituals (social religion) or on our engagement in spiritual battles (mysticism). The Pharisees of Jesus' day had fallen into both errors and become rigid about following rules, and accused Jesus of having an evil spirit. The truth for us and for them is Christ, the fulfillment of both social religion and mysticism.

*Do I focus on Christ and avoid erroneous teaching?*

August 19

Colossians 3:1-17 Heavenly living

Paul told us to set our sights on heaven and to let heaven fill our thoughts. In Ephesians he told us that we have ascended to heaven with Christ and in some way are already there (Ephesians 2:6). In Philippians he told us that we are already citizens of heaven (Philippians 1:27). Here in Colossians he told us to keep our focus on heaven rather than earth. Our real life is in Christ and we will someday share his glory.

In Jesus' kingdom parables he gave us the vision that we can enter the heavenly kingdom now. The evidence of that is fruitfulness, having a positive impact on others, and showing a lot of love. The parables also point to a future when good and bad are separated, and those who love Jesus are with him.

What are we to make of Paul and Jesus' idea that we already live in heaven? We are so aware of how difficult life is, that this perspective can be a challenge. Paul's practical advice is to be transformed people. To let go of sin, not to be greedy for good things in this life, to avoid anger and lies, and to live out of our new natures. Our characters should be merciful, kind, humble, gentle, patient, making allowances for others and forgiving. We should live with love, peace, thankfulness, and wisdom. It appears that our new natures, reinforced by focusing on Jesus, are how to extend heaven's impact on earth.

*Am I living as a representative of Jesus?*

August 20

## Colossians 3:18-25 4:1 Household standards

Paul repeated the advice to households he gave to the Ephesians. To the more powerful parties he said: husbands love, fathers be considerate, and masters be fair. To the weaker parties he said: wives submit, children obey, and slaves obey and work hard. To modernize, we could say that employers should be fair, and employees should follow the rules and work hard.

These power differences are still with us. If the more powerful do as they are told, it is easy for the others. If they do not, it becomes problematic. Consequently, the issue arises of what to do when things are not going well. We know we are to live in peace, and so adjustments may be needed in marriages, families, or workplaces, including leaving a less than peaceful situation.

*Do I make love my goal in all situations?*

August 21

## Colossians 4:2-18 Helpful friends

Paul began his letter saying he prayed often for them, and now he asked them to be devoted to prayer and to pray for him and his ministry. He encouraged gracious and effective conversation and to live wisely in society. Good human relations advice from a man who had often suffered rejection.

Then he launched into news of friends we know, as well as new ones:

Tychicus--He was a messenger who had been with him since the nine travelers left Ephesus together (Acts 20)

Onesimus--He was the ex-slave Paul was sending back to Colossians and his master Philemon with the plea for kindness.

Aristarchus--Along with Gaius, he was caught in the Ephesian riot (Acts 19), was one of the nine travelers (Acts 20), and was now in prison with Paul.

Mark, Barnabas's cousin--He was the one over whom Paul and Barnabas quarrelled (Acts 15:38). Now he was a valuable coworker who might be coming their way.

Jesus Justus--He was identified as a Jewish believer working for the Kingdom of God with Paul and others.

Epaphras--He was from Colossae and had been the one to preach the gospel to them. He was in prison with Paul (Philemon 1:23) and prayed earnestly for them.

Luke--We met him in Acts 16 when he began traveling with Paul. We know him as the author of the gospel and of Acts, loyal to Paul to the end. (II Timothy 4:11)

Demas--He was identified at this point as a co-worker (Philemon 1:24). But at the end of his life Paul would express sadness that he loved the world. (II Timothy 4:10)

Nympha and Archippus--Christian leaders in Colossae.

These are all people whose relationship with Paul causes us to feel we know them to some extent. Just as the disciples of Jesus become familiar friends and models to us, so it is with Paul's disciples. Friendships as we work to extend the kingdom are natural, normal, human and fallible.

*Do I have (and express) genuine appreciation for my friends?*

I THESSALONIANS: CHRIST, COMING ONE

August 22

I Thessalonians 1:1-10 Faithful in suffering

This may have been one of the very first Christian documents, written only 20 or so years after Christ's resurrection. Paul, Silas and Timothy had preached and converted many in Thessalonica, and the three of them wrote the letter to encourage the new believers. They welcomed the message eagerly and Jews, godly Greek men, and important women of the city became believers. But then the preachers were run out of town, and the believers suffered as well. A mob attacked Jason's home searching for Paul and Silas and dragged him and other believers before the city council. They had to post bail to be released. As the authors said, their suffering was an imitation of the apostles and the Lord.

Most of us live in situations where we do not suffer as believers and we wonder how we would do if we were arrested. In John we learn of repeated attempts to arrest Jesus, and know the tragic result when it finally happened.

We need to pray for those who do get arrested today for their faith has can happened in countries with little religious freedom. We also need to be willing to engage in civil disobedience (think Martin Luther King, Jr. or Cesar Chavez or Dorothy Day or many others) if our Christian conscience requires it. We will then also become people imitating Paul, Silas, Timothy, and Jesus.

*Is my conviction and commitment as strong as these believers?*

August 24

I Thessalonians 2:1-12 Parental care

Paul reminded them of how they had been called into the Kingdom to share his glory. Despite having been in jail, Paul and Silas preached boldly and were as gentle with them as a mother. They loved the people, and worked hard not to be any financial burden.

In all of this they were replicating Jesus' ministry. He had come to invite people into the Kingdom, making that his primary way of calling people to a renewed and repentant life. He

treated troubled or sick people very gently, and told us he is gentle at heart (Matthew 11:29). He demonstrated love, told the disciples he loved them, and elevated love as the most important command. Nor was he ever a financial burden to those he was serving.

Here we have a model for our ministries. To invite people into the Kingdom, to treat others gently and with love, and to give generously without any demands. The kind of gentleness is that of a patient parent toward rowdy children, or as it says here as a mother nursing her infant. A baby seems breakable when tiny, and every movement is protective, and careful. That needs to be our heart in ministry.

*Do I draw others to Christ with gentle love?*

August 25

I Thessalonians 2:13-19 Facing persecution

The team had to leave Thessaloniki sooner than they would have liked because of the mob. And Paul was concerned about the persecution they faced and very much wanted to return to see them and lamented that though he tried repeatedly, it did not work out. He expressed intense longing for them.

He compared the persecution they expressed to what had happened to the new believers in Judea. In fact, he had been one of the main persecutors trying to stamp out the new movement. He compared the persecution to what had happened to prophets of the past who were killed. This happened under wicked King Ahab (I Kings 19:10) But the pinnacle of persecution was what happened to Jesus. Their rejection and suffering had been foretold by Jesus who said that if he as their Lord and Master was rejected, what would happen to his servants.

Through the centuries the tables definitely turned, and it was Christians who killed and persecuted the Jewish people. Jews were killed by Crusaders in Europe on the way to the Holy Land. Jews were made scapegoats for the plague. There were massacres, forced expulsions, forced baptisms, and being forced to live in Ghettos. Christianity lost its way and instead of being faithful as recipients of persecution, became full of religious persecutors.

As we acknowledge the failures of Christian history, we also need to acknowledge the extent to which we today are justifying violence of Jews/Christians versus Muslims. We know that to follow in Jesus' way we need to be recipients, not perpetrators, of persecution.

*Do I seek peace? Am I committed to nonviolence and dialogue?*

August 26

I Thessalonians 3:1-12 Faith strengthened

Paul's longing for the Thessalonians was such that "he could stand it no longer." Twice he says this, and the solution was to send Timothy to check up on them and make sure their faith was strong. He was so relieved to get good news. Silas and Timothy had stayed in Berea after leaving Thessaloniki, while Paul was forced to keep going for his safety. He went to Athens and then to Corinth where presumably Silas and Timothy joined him and from where this letter was written.

Paul was reassured that they remembered his visit with affection and wanted him to visit as much as he wanted to come. He had only been there three weeks, but on his third missionary journey he went through Macedonia where he would have seen them again.

This emotional vulnerability in Paul is an attractive trait that he shared with Jesus. Jesus cried over Lazarus, wept over Jerusalem, agonized in the garden, and was often moved with compassion for those he healed. Christian leadership is not intended to be distant and professional, but rather interconnected, loving and human. We suffer for those who suffer, weep with those who weep, rejoice with those who rejoice. And if there are times we are concerned about someone and can "stand it no longer" we have Paul's example that it is good to listen to that concern and find out what is going on.

*Do I make strong attachments to others in ministry?*

August 27

I Thessalonians 4:1-12 Faithful lives

Paul urges them to live holy lives, free of sexual sins, free of adultery. Such sins represent rejecting God, not mere human rules, and God avenges such sin. Instead our ambition should be to live quietly, working hard, loving others, and not be financially dependent on others.

Jesus took the Old Testament command against adultery and coveting the wife of another, and went deep. He said that lustful thoughts meant that someone was already in adultery. He warned us to be ruthless in getting rid of this sin. Instead he called us to a purity of heart that sees God.

It is heartbreaking that today in American Christianity we seem to have an epidemic of sexual sin and immorality, not only among church members, but among church leaders. Repeated scandals tell us that Paul's call to remember that we each need to control our bodies and live in holiness and honor is as applicable today as it was then.

*Am I conscious of avoiding lust that can lead to even more sin?*

August 28

## I Thessalonians 4:13-18 Future life

The new believers seemed confused about those among them who had died. Paul said they did not need to be full of sorrow, but because of Jesus' resurrection, there is hope. When he returns he will bring with him all who have died. As he descends with a shout, with the trumpet and call of an archangel, we will all be together.

Jesus preached that he would arrive on the clouds with power and glory, send out his angels with the sounds of a mighty trumpet blast, and gather together those who love him. (Matthew 24:30,31) Paul adds the image that not only are the living gathered up, but those who have died in faith as well.

We who believe do not need to fear death. We have the hope of the resurrection and the joy that Jesus promised we will have when we see him. If our family or friends die in faith, this is a profound comfort. And we can anticipate our own death with peace and gratitude. If we are fortunate enough to be alive when Jesus comes, better yet!

*Has my faith overcome my fear of death?*

August 29

## I Thessalonians 5:1-11 Final days

Paul's exposition on how the day of Christ's return will come like a thief, but we won't be surprised because we are children of the light, is an exposition or repetition of Christ's teaching on this subject. We are to stay alert, and we live with the great hope that we will live with him forever.

Christ compared his return to a homeowner coming back from a trip. He had left them instructions about their work and told the gatekeeper to watch for him. He said that no one knows the day or the hour, so we need to stay alert and keep watch. We can pay attention to the signs, something he compared to noticing buds on a fig tree, and being aware that the fruit is almost ripe.

There are many voices in the church today saying that they see these signs. They include such dramatic prophetic fulfillments such as the recreation of the state of Israel, the increase of wars and natural disasters, and the preaching of the gospel in every corner of the world. It is definitely a time for alertness. We don't want to be like those expecting the Messiah who missed him when he came.

*Am I eagerly watching for Christ's return?*

August 30

## I Thessalonians 5:12-28 Faultless lives

Paul wanted their whole spirit, soul and body to be kept blameless. He gave a list of suggestions on how that can be the case. I am struck that Jesus spoke of many of these things as his gifts to us or showed us them by his example; we are not stuck trying to do these things in our strength alone.

Honor and love leaders	"Come follow me!" (Matthew 4:19)
Live peaceably	"God blesses those who work for peace." (Matt. 5:9)
Warn the lazy	"You wicked and lazy servant!" (Matt. 25:36)
Encourage the timid	"Be encouraged, my child!" (Matt. 9:2)
Take care of the weak.	"He will not crush the weakest reed." (Matt. 12:20)
Be patient with all	"God blesses those who are merciful." (Matt. 5:7)
Don't pay back evil.	"Love your enemies." (Matt. 5:44)
Be joyful	"Your joy will overflow!" (John 15:11)
Keep on praying	"Keep watch and pray." (Matt. 26:41)
Be thankful	"Father, thank you for hearing me." (John 11:41)
Don't stifle the Spirit	"The Holy Spirit will teach you everything." (John 14:26)
Don't scoff at prophecies.	"This was a fulfillment of prophecy." (John 12:16)
Hold on to good	"Let good deeds shine out." (Matt. 5:16)
Keep away from evil.	"Deliver us from the evil one." (Matthew 6:13)

There is consistency between Jesus and Paul and we should be consistent with them in our lives and teaching. We have models in each of the apostles of how Jesus living in them looked different because of different personalities, but looked the same because of fundamental identity with him.

*Is my character recognizable as like that of Jesus?*

## II THESSALONIANS: CHRIST, OUR SAVIOR

August 31

II Thessalonians 1:1-6 Persecution

Paul, Silas and Timothy wrote again to encourage the believers because they were concerned about the persecutions they were experiencing. The thought is that the team had been in Macedonia (Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea) and then Greece (Athens, Corinth). They then stayed several years in Corinth which gave the opportunity to write these letters. They then completed Paul's second missionary journey, returning to home base in Antioch.

The people were faithfully enduring persecution and the authors say that they were suffering for God's Kingdom. Jesus had warned that the way into the Kingdom could be hard, and he



compared it to a narrow door, rather than the wide and easy path of ordinary life. Often we would like to think that Kingdom life is easy, and while it is true that it is a cheerful and upbeat life, we have the example of Jesus and all these early church leaders that we should expect challenges.

It makes our lives so much more meaningful and manageable if we accept that it is a challenge. We have a narrow door to go through, and if we just expect that, we will be realistic and encouraged, rather than shocked and discouraged when there are problems.

*Do I expect life to be easy or do I expect challenges?*

September 1

II Thessalonians 1:7-12 Separation from God

For many of us who grasp God's love, the notion of "flaming fire", "everlasting destruction", and "forever separated from the Lord" are hard words. I far prefer the assurance that God wants all to be saved (I Timothy 2:4) and the hint at a chance of decisions after death in Jesus' preaching to the spirits (I Peter 4:19). But it is here and in other parts of scripture.

Jesus said three times that people will be in "outer darkness" if they do not come to his light. (Matthew 8:12, 22:15, 25:30). I almost lost my faith as a teen over this issue, but realized that my concern was fairness. Since scripture repeats over and over that God's character is just and loving, I realized I was making a false assumption that I would not be satisfied he had lived up to his character. A helpful perspective came from C.S. Lewis' exploration of hell in *The Great Divorce*. A single quote cannot do it justice, but it is helpful reading for those troubled by these passages.

Meanwhile, we can join in Paul's prayer that we be worthy of our calling so that people will honor Jesus because of us. Our lives need to be part of attracting people to the light.

*Am I seeking to live a worthy life?*

September 2

II Thessalonians 2:1-12 Prior to his return

Having addressed the Second Coming in the previous letter, apparently Paul had gotten news that some said Jesus had already returned. He corrected this, saying that there would first be a lawless person who would exalt himself as God.

Jesus also referred back to Daniel's prophecy of desecration in the Holy Place. This was fulfilled by Antiochus Epiphanes (from whose desecration emerged the celebration of Hanukkah when it was overturned.). Caligula attempted to force the placement of an image of himself in the

temple in around 40 AD, but died before he could do so. It was also fulfilled by Titus when the temple and Jerusalem were destroyed in 70 AD. Paul points to a future fulfillment before Christ's return, and so the figure of Anti-Christ has become a cultural fixture.

But for today, we are reminded that "his lawlessness is already at work secretly." We can see it in the disrespect for truth that is pervasive in media and political figures. We see it in powerful people assuming they are above the law. We see it in our church corruption scandals. In all these things there is a warning for us to ask for God's mercy.

*Do I grieve over evil?*

September 3

II Thessalonians 2:13-17 Stand firm

We are now showered with positive words: thank, dear, chosen, salvation, Spirit, holy believer, truth, called, gospel, glory, stand firm, a strong grip, loved, spiritual favor, comfort, hope, good in what you do and say. All this stands in contrast to the lies and lawlessness he had just described.

Jesus did not minimize the evil spiritual forces around us, but he liberated people from them. He focused on the greater power of the Kingdom. Even though the Kingdom comes slowly and humbly, it is full of great power. "I have overcome the world" he told us.

It seems good and healthy to focus on the positive and keep our eyes on Jesus and his Kingdom. Things may fall apart, but we will stand firm no matter what happens with our attention on the right things.

*Am I standing firm?*

September 4

II Thessalonians 3:1-4 Prayer requested

Paul asked for prayer for himself, prayer that the gospel would spread, and prayer for protection. He prayed that the would be brought into an an ever deeper understanding of God's love.

Prayer is deeply mysterious. Why should our making requests make anything change? Even more mysterious is that Jesus prayed. Why would God himself need to do this? Jesus clearly saw prayer as important since he took time for this and taught his disciples to pray. His was not only contemplative prayer, but petitionary prayer, and he made lavish promises of answers if we pray in his name.

I find it easy to doubt God's love for people when I see them suffering or making a request that is not answered. I also struggle to see how he is actually exercising his power on their behalf. Consequently, I need the answer to Paul's prayer for an ever deeper understanding of God's love. When I pray for someone I have learned to start by thanking God for them and for his love for them. My prayer then seems like a form of cooperating with his love.

This quote continues to challenge and guide me. "When we pray remember 1) The love of God that wants the best for us, 2) The wisdom of God that knows what is best for us, 3) The power of God that can accomplish it. -- William Barclay"

*Am I praying within the context of God's love?*

September 5

II Thessalonians 3:5-18 Work hard

Paul categorized laziness as in the same terribly class of sins that Christians need to challenge one another on. If someone persisted in idleness, it was time to avoid them. Paul had set an example of hard work, and he was distressed to hear there were idle meddlers in the community of faith.

Jesus used the parable of funds being given and wasted to reproach laziness. There is no excuse for thinking that dependence on God means that one is not supposed to work. One can imagine that since we do not hear about this again, the lazy ones listened and made a change.

For us today we alternate between over-work and being lazy, and we need the help of the Spirit to gain balance. We need to be people with moderation, restraint, power over ourselves, who do not fall into either of the cultural traps so popular today.

*Do I work hard at what God has given me to do?*

I TIMOTHY: CHRIST, OUR EXAMPLE

September 6

I Timothy 1:1-5 Paul's dear child

We have just read two books where Timothy was one of the co-authors. Now Timothy was the recipient of a book intended to encourage him as a Christian leader. The supposition is that this was the next to the last letter Paul wrote, after they had known one another and worked together for over 15 years. Hence, the affection is understandable as Paul called Timothy his true child in the faith.

Timothy worked in many places with or without Paul: Thessalonica, Corinth, Philippi, and Ephesus. The letter began by saying Paul had left him at Ephesus when he headed for Macedonia. This would have been about ten years earlier on Paul's third missionary journey, which ended, of course with his arrest in Jerusalem. Paul was concerned that wrong doctrine was being preached and causing arguments. We will discover that the same rigidity about following the Law that was such a point of conflict in Jesus' ministry was a problem in that largely Greek city.

Paul made a point that he was Christ's apostle. Even though he was not one of the twelve disciples/apostles, Christ had sent him out personally in a vision. Part of the work of an apostle was to teach and train others, and in the relationship between Paul and Timothy we get a portrait of how that happened. We need to build relationships like those between Jesus and his disciples and Paul and his disciples.

*Am I comfortable as a mentee (disciple) or as a mentor (apostle) or both?*

September 7

I Timothy 1:6-11 Misunderstanding the law

Having written a devotional that seeks to show how the Old Testament connects to Christ, I am concerned that I not fall into the category of those Paul criticized who want to teach the law but do not know what they are talking about! Paul said that the law best serves to set moral guidelines for those without them, so they will come to Christ. Today our culture quarrels over one point in this list: homosexuality. All agree that the rest of the list violates the morality that we learned, in part, from the law as incorporated into our culture.

Jesus said he did not abolish the law, but had fulfilled it (Matthew 5:17). He explained after the resurrection how he fulfilled the law and the prophets. (Luke 24:44.45). Hebrews shows us how that is the case, and Paul emphasized that because of the completion we are under new standards of freedom.

For years I struggled to see how Jesus, advocating love of enemies, was compatible with the law, which advocated destruction of enemies. A few helpful insights caused me to look at each passage through the lens of Jesus, and the result was a devotional and now this devotional trilogy. I appeal for correction and dialogue about anything in my explorations of the Old and New. My goal has been to link things correctly in Christ.

*How integrated is my understanding of connections between Old and New Testaments?*

September 8

I Timothy 1:12-20 Trustworthy

Paul acknowledged his time persecuting the church and God's great mercy toward him. He looked back on himself as the worst of sinners whose salvation can encourage others to believe. He then offered Timothy instructions, recalling prophetic words given him. Cling to faith, and keep your conscience clear, Paul advised.

For many of us who are mothers or fathers, we may see our own children as our "Timothys" who need our testimonies and our instruction. Timothy was Paul's "dear son", but we may have literal children we hope will stay in faith and keep a clear conscience. But what if they falter as did the unhappy pair Paul mentioned?

Ruth Bell Graham wrote some wise and comforting words: "'I want to be here when the children and grandchildren need me. From my vantage point, I can follow their struggles with peace in my heart, knowing that God will bring order out of chaos and light out of darkness. Battles may be lost, but God will win in the end. We have given each one to Him, each one uniquely loved, each one dear: our most treasured possessions. ... As each family builds its nest, I shall be watching with interest, and love, concern at times, but concern undergirded with confidence, knowing God is in control.'" (Footprints, p. 162)

*Do I rest in faith in God's love for my "dear children?"*

September 9

I Timothy 2:1-8 Pray for peace

Paul urged us to pray. To pray for our authorities, to pray free of anger or controversy. He reassured us that God wants all to be saved and to understand the truth. And what is to be a characteristic of our prayer? To plead for mercy and to be thankful. Jesus taught us to never stop asking, but to persist. We can keep asking for peace.

I have slowly learned not only to thank God for his blessings on people, but to thank him for his great love for each person I pray for. That reassures me that in my loving desires for them I am coordinating with what his best and highest will might be. This passage urges me to pray in that same loving, not angry, way for those who are our political authorities. We often see unwise and even wicked things done by rulers in the world, but we can plead for mercy and ask for peace. Our attitude in prayer needs to be tenderhearted and hopeful.

*Do I humbly pray for all to be saved, even politicians I can see are doing badly?*

September 10

I Timothy 2:9-15 True femininity

Paul's ideal of silent women probably needs some modification from his baseline theology that men and women are equals in Christ. His perspective that we all, men and women, need to be gentle and humble, resulted in an attractive portrait of a godly woman: not extreme in dress or jewelry, doing good, a great listener and learner, a good mother, loving faithfully, with holiness and modesty.

Jesus' love and respect for women is something we have noted. He entrusted them with the most important and compelling message: his resurrection. Though living in a patriarchal society, he had many respectful and loving relationships that allowed women to work with him in ministry.

I am blessed by so many outstanding women leaders and teachers in our time. Many neatly handle this scripture by saying women are only to teach other women (as Paul said we are to do in Titus 2:3,4). Others say "that was a different culture from ours." But we have many wonderful women teachers today who show us how to do right.

*Am I committed to becoming a more godly woman?*

September 11

I Timothy 3:1-16 Tested character

Paul outlined the ideas of character in Christian leaders. We have seen many failures in this arena, and not the least are failures in marriage and raising children well. Jesus promoted these character qualities and advocated for living without divorce, and with love and respect for children, seeing them as exemplary of the kingdom.

In his poem at the end Paul celebrated not only that Jesus came in the flesh and was taken into heaven, but that he has been announced to the nations. One doing this work on an extraordinary scale was Billy Graham, but there was a cost and his children struggled. When her son was wandering, Ruth Bell Graham wrote:

Fleeing from You nothing he sees  
of your preceding as he flees.  
Choosing his own paths how could he know  
Your hand directs where he shall go.  
Thinking he's free, "free at last",  
unaware Your right hand holds him fast.  
Waiting for darkness to hide in night  
not knowing, with You dark is as light.  
Poor prodigal! Seeking a "where" from "whence"  
how does one escape omnipotence?

*Do I have faith God can make right any of my failures and make me a worthy Christian leader?*

September 12

I Timothy 4:1-16 Teachers

Paul followed in Jesus' footsteps in calling out false teachers. For both of them their frustration was with those who insisted on the right rituals, but left out the heart. Paul urged Timothy to be a godly teacher who was an example, who focused on scripture, who used his spiritual gifts and worked hard. Jesus gave charges to his disciples to have good character, to use their gifts to heal and liberate people, not to be concerned about hardships, but to let him work through them. He urged them to suffer well.

But godly teachers lived out of the heart, including a heart of suffering. Paul said "we work hard and suffer much in order that people will believe the truth." Timothy knew Paul's suffering, and Timothy himself would spend time in prison. They both knew Jesus' suffering. Ruth Bell Graham is a contemporary sufferer who wrote bracing encouragement when we struggle.

Spare not the pain thought the way I take  
be lonely and dark, though the whole soul ache,  
for the flesh must die though the heart may break.  
Spare not the pain, oh, spare not the pain.

*Do I suffer willingly that others might believe?*

September 13

I Timothy 5:1-25 Wisdom

Paul urged respect for our wise Christian elders, men and women. He urged care in listening to complaints against them, and said to pay them well. Jesus told his disciples not to worry about those who disrespected or rejected them, but to move on. He told them not to worry about their financial needs, but to expect provision.

He urged us to be generous in caring for women alone. In our time that doubtless includes single moms as well as elderly widows. Jesus modeled care for his own widowed mother. At the moment of his death he asked John to take her under his care.

Once again he offered a portrait of a godly woman: one who had brought her children up well, was kind to strangers, served other Christians with humility, and was always ready to do good. I aspire for people to be able to look at the overall trajectory of my life and say I did these things.

*Am I always seeking to grow?*

September 14

I Timothy 6:1-21 True religion

Paul contrasted false teachers who were falling into the trap of craving money with the wealth of contentment he wanted for Timothy. He gave a litany of advice parents can give their children:

Run from evil, follow good  
Pursue a godly life  
Fight for what we believe  
Hold tight to eternal life  
Avoid foolish discussions

He told him not to trust money but rather to use money for good. Thereby one is storing up heavenly treasure, just as Jesus said. In Jesus' prayer he asked that we might not be led into temptation, but might be delivered from evil. Unfortunately today we have seen a generation of Christian leaders become enamored of money and thereby bring disrepute on the faith. It is so important to remember that, as Paul said, God gives us all we need for our enjoyment. Delight in the beauty of God's gifts that cost nothing is the right way to live. Enjoy his brilliant light.

*Do I enjoy God's free gifts?*

II TIMOTHY: CHRIST, OUR SERVANT

September 15

II Timothy 1:1-8

Tradition offers the idea that after Paul's imprisonment in Rome during which he wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon, he was released. During that release it is thought that he once more returned to Greece, but possibly also reached his goal of preaching in Spain. But now he was once more incarcerated in Rome, writing to encourage Timothy before his death at the hands of Emperor Nero.

He had met Timothy in Lystra in Asia minor and knew his Jewish mother who was married to a Greek. (Acts 16:1) We now learn that his mother's name was Eunice and that Paul knew his grandmother Lois as well. He urged Timothy not to be ashamed of him, even though he was in prison. We recall Jesus' exhortation to visit those in prison, without any qualification that it is only if they are there unjustly or for their faith. (Matthew 25:36). It is just expected that we will show compassion to prisoners.



Paul is asking for a visit (II Timothy 4:9). And he knows that Timothy will want to come since their bond is strong. Timothy was his dear son and cried when they were parted. Paul anticipated the joy of this coming visit.

A verse that has encouraged many is here--verse 7: "For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.". This is a great antidote to the fears that beset us all. We have a greater Spirit within us.

*Do I pray for and visit prisoners?*

September 16

II Timothy 1:9-14 Entrusted

Paul reflected on the message of the gospel he preached and for which he was suffering. He said he has entrusted himself to Christ, and he urged Timothy to guard the message and leadership that had been entrusted to him. We recall how Jesus entrusted the task of spreading the good news throughout the world to the disciples after the resurrection: "take this message of repentance to all the nations." (Luke 24:47). Paul similarly entrusted the message to fragile Timothy.

The Way translation puts verses 9-11 into poetic form and calls it the "Hymn of the Gracious Call". The translator justifies introducing hymn forms when others do 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)

He has delivered us;  
He has called us with a hallowing call;  
Not for any deserts of ours,  
But in furtherance of His own purpose,  
And the grace which, in the person of Messiah Jesus,  
Was given us ere the eternal ages began,  
But has now been revealed  
Through the appearing of our Savior, Jesus the Messiah,  
When He brought death to nothingness,  
And made a new day dawn, a day of life,  
Of life imperishable,  
Through the Glad-tidings--

*Do I guard the message that has been entrusted to me and entrust it to others?*

September 17

II Timothy 1:15-18 Loneliness

Paul fell into a rare bout of complaining. He says some good friends who came from Asia had deserted him. He wrote that he was on his own when brought before the judge. "Everyone had abandoned me." Then he cheered up a little and was grateful for Onesiphorus who tracked him down and visited him often. Some have left out of worldliness, some to do ministry, but "only Luke is with me.". Faithful Luke, who had been a companion since shortly after Timothy joined with Paul.

Paul's rich relationships that we see in all of his letters seem more fragile as he approaches death. It reminds us that Jesus, too, was abandoned by all the disciples. They ran. Only John stood with Mary and the others at the cross. Judas betrayed him and Peter denied him, just as Paul cited some who have done him harm. Even in his suffering Paul was conformed to Christ's example.

If we ever feel our friends or family are deserting or abandoning us, it is comforting to know that a great man like Paul felt this. But he also had the capacity to look for and appreciate those who did care about him. And as he wrote, he knew that Timothy cared, even though he was far away.

*When my emotions are sensitive and I feel alone, am I able to see realistically where I do have support?*

September 18

II Timothy 2:1-13 Endure suffering

Paul urged Timothy to endure suffering. Presumably the soldiers that surrounded him in his imprisonment made them an obvious model of endurance. He called Timothy Christ's soldier. Then he compared endurance to the discipline of an athlete or a hardworking farmer. Paul was suffering and chained like a criminal--no house arrest this time. Instead he needed the message to endure, hoping it would result in good.

The hymn he quoted is recognized as such by most translators. Though very simple, its content takes us back to Jesus' teaching. Jesus explained clearly that the call to a disciple was to be willing to die with him: put aside selfish ambition, shoulder your cross. He promised that if we give up our lives for his sake, we will find true life. He later said that if we are ashamed of him, he will be ashamed of us. (Mark 8:34-38). When Peter asked what they were going to get out of having given up everything to follow him, Christ responded that when he was on his glorious throne in the kingdom, they would be also on thrones. (Matthew 19:27-28)

But the hymn ends with the reassuring thought that even if our endurance fails, God's never does.

*Do I have the character quality of endurance?*

September 19

II Timothy 2:14-26 Excellent vs. troublesome speech

Paul called for excellent character: speak wisely, work hard, stay pure, be kind and patient. Paul said to avoid arguments, foolish discussions, or foolish, ignorant arguments that only start fights. It is helpful to know that people teaching eccentric doctrines are nothing new. In the case cited here it was that resurrection had passed. He said in contrast Timothy should teach kindly, effectively and patiently.

In Jesus' last week at the Temple he was repeatedly engaged by religious leaders over arcane points of doctrine they hope would entrap him. Their purpose was not truth, but was to start a fight. Jesus gave answers that quickly silenced them and did not set up an argument.

Instead of wasting time on petty disputes, Paul encouraged becoming utensils God can use. He encouraged patience with difficult people. In our time we do have theological arguments that can fall into fighting words, but perhaps even more commonly we allow our political discourse to descend to unkind and foolish levels. We need to be wiser as Paul said, and use our speech to build up others.

*Am I useful to God? Am I speaking wisely?*

September 20

II Timothy 3:1-9 Evil character

Unfortunately, we have a lot of American celebrities who fit this description to a T. The advice is to "stay away from people like these" and method #1 is to turn them off of the TV, ignore them on social media, not read about them, and instead fill our minds with good and positive things. We should probably spare some prayers for their repentance when they intrude themselves on us in some way.

Paul made reference to two Egyptian sorcerers who opposed Moses at the Exodus. He gave names not in the Old Testament, but Origen, an early church father, referred to the Book of Jannes and Jambres which perhaps existed in his day, but no longer.

Does this description refer to some of Jesus' opponents? They were certainly obsessed with money, were too arrogant to listen, they slandered, and Jesus said their respect for God was a sham. Evil is not creative.

We need to root out our own self-centeredness, but we also need to be alert not to fall into the orbit of other self-centered people.

*Do I recognize a person acting in an evil way?*

September 21

II Timothy 3:10-17 Endure persecution

Paul wrote that Timothy was imitating him by following his example, and modeling his life after Paul. He said Timothy had gained his same faith, longing, patience, and endurance as an attentive disciple. He concluded with the famous verses about how beneficial scripture is for us.

Interestingly, it has only been in the past century that an extreme developed in interpreting scripture that does not fully appreciate the book as a collection of very different kinds of documents. Instead, by emphasizing its inspiration, we feel a little guilty when we fail to get something deep out of, for example, the description of land boundaries in Joshua which are hard to match to a map. We need to recognize that Jesus is the center, and all the other books orbit around him. It is alright to recognize the gospels as the central values of our faith to which the Old Testament, for example, must conform.

Jesus is the one we listen to most closely. He said "the very words I have spoken to you are spirit and life." (John 6:63) "My words are not my own. What I am telling you is from the Father who sent me." (John 14:24). All these meditations take Jesus as their center.

*Do I accept Jesus and his words as my highest authority?*

September 22

II Timothy 4:1-8 Excel in ministry

Paul knew he would soon be put to death. This was his last letter written from prison before his martyrdom, perhaps in 68 AD in Rome. He looked ahead to Christ's return when Christ would set up his kingdom, and would give him and others crowns of righteousness. He knew he was reaching the finish line.

His farewell to a close ministry coworker reminds us of Jesus' farewell to his disciples as he approached death. Jesus' final prayer anticipated returning to the glory he had shared with God before the world began (John 17:5)

Both Paul and Jesus looked ahead to glory. Paul described it as receiving a crown, an image of dignity, honor, and reward. We are reminded we already have royal status as part of Christ's family, Death is not something to dread, but a promotion to glory and honor and joy.

*Am I running my race faithfully?*

September 23

II Timothy 4:9-22 Ending well

Even as he neared death, Paul had plenty to do. He sent updates of where people in their leadership network had gone. He wanted Timothy to visit and thought he would have time for reading and writing, so wanted his books and papers. He had been without anyone except God with him as he faced the judge. He looked forward to arriving safely in God's heavenly kingdom.

Before Jesus' ascension, he spent time coaching his followers and commissioned them to scatter in ministry. "Go into all the world," he said and then went to heaven where he was seated at God's right hand.

Paul and his friends continued to carry this out. There is something exhilarating about being part of a vast worldwide network of people in ministry, inter-connected, traveling, doing practical work, and all looking ahead to the fulfillment of the kingdom. Names are different today, but the network is even more vigorous than it was in Paul's day.

*Am I inter-connected with a worldwide Christian community?*

TITUS: CHRIST, OUR MORAL GUIDE

September 24

Titus 1:1-9 Church leadership

Paul took Titus, a Greek convert, with him to Jerusalem after his first missionary journey (Galatians 2:1-3). He was accepted without having to be circumcised, an important issue since the new community of faith was struggling with how Jewish the Gentile converts needed to become. Later on, as Paul was on his third missionary journey, he depended on Titus to go and straighten out difficult church problems in Corinth.

A true son to Paul, at this point Titus had been left to lead the church on the island of Crete. Timothy was leading the church in Ephesus, and so the three "pastoral letters" as they are called were written to encourage these leaders. Paul's strategy was for Titus to appoint leaders

in each town. This set of interconnected but geographically scattered people needed to have good character.

Jesus also selected leaders and he worked with their weaknesses. But the greed in Judas was a fatal flaw. Fatal leadership flaws have plagued the church, all opposite to what is laid out here: unfaithfulness in marriage, troubled children, arrogance, addictions, mismanaging money, a weak spiritual life, and even apostasy. At the same time, there have been generation after generation of leaders that exemplify what Paul encouraged, and these salt of the earth people have grown the church.

*Do I have the character qualities required for leadership?*

September 25

Titus 1:10-16 Pure lives

The early church struggled over how ethnically Jewish new Gentile converts needed to be, and this was a problem for Titus in Crete. The issue repeatedly surfaced and Paul offered the strong insight that Jews and Gentiles were both one in Christ, and people did not need to first become Jewish to be Christians. He accused the false teachers of wanting money, and quoted a proverb to say they were liars, cruel and lazy.

These teachers were of the type Jesus said made their converts twice the sons of hell as they were. (Matthew 23:15). Crete had required crossing part of the Mediterranean as had settlements across the empire; in each city there were enough Jews to establish synagogues. Jesus rebuked religious leaders who were full of hypocrisy sternly, which is what Paul told Titus to do.

How are we to apply this? In many ways we may be quick to rebuke in an online comment which ends up doing nothing but be hurtful. Perhaps it is best to talk to people, and for pastors to challenge anyone defying their authority and causing divisions in the congregation. In chapter 3 he will urge gentle communication, and perhaps we need that admonition more.

*Do I notice if teaching seems to be trying to make money rather than really building up the people of God?*

September 26

Titus 2:1-15 Promote right living

Paul gave Titus practical advice on how the daily life of older men, older women, young women, young men, and slaves should look. As an older woman I am chastened to think, "yes, I do sometimes speak ill of others" and "while I may not drink, I can overindulge in sweets" and I wonder "'how well do I pass on wise advice to younger women?"

Jesus urged us not to judge and condemn others, but to leave judgment to God. He modeled all the virtues that Paul called for: self-control, wisdom, faith, love, patience, teaching what is good, loving children, purity, doing good deeds, having integrity and seriousness in teaching, shaming those who want to argue, trustworthy, etc. His critics thought he spent too much time at parties where alcohol was served, but no one could accuse him of heavy drinking.

I look up to older Christian women who can inspire me to do better. It says they teach younger ones to love their husbands and children. One of the great lessons of my life has been to learn to thank God for his great love for each one, and to put my requests for them on the solid foundation that he is loving them better than I can.

*Do I continually acknowledge any failures and keep aspiring to higher ideals?*

September 27

Titus 3:1-8 Peaceful lives

Titus was to teach people to avoid quarreling, to avoid speaking evil of anyone, and to be gentle and humble. This contrasts with the tone Titus was told to take with false teachers in chapter 1. Paul celebrated the kindness and love God has shown us that we are to pass on.

Jesus repeatedly made humility and gentleness the stand-out qualities that kingdom people need to have. He displayed those qualities with vulnerable and sinful people, and in his teachings to the crowds and to the disciples. He was respectful even when governmental authorities were unjust. He reserved his sternest language for false teachers. He had the kindness of a priest, and the ferocity of a prophet.

Gentle does not equal passive; stern does not equal aggressive. Both can be variants of appropriately assertive communication. Perhaps our core personalities incline us one way or the other, but we can learn to do both in love.

*Do I avoid quarreling? Do I avoid speaking evil of anyone? Am I gentle and humble?*

September 28

Titus 3:9-15 Productive lives

What can one do when an attempt to resolve a conflict has been unsuccessful? Paul said that if you are the pastor it is your duty to warn the divisive person twice and then let them go. Jesus said to involve others from the community in the effort to resolve the problem, but if unsuccessful, to move to polite distance.

With a theology so strong on forgiveness and reconciliation, these are helpful caveats. We can forgive anyone on our own, but if the other party is unwilling, we cannot force a reconciliation. A forgiving heart is essential, and openness to future reconciliation, but peace may require temporary separations.

Paul ended his letter with his usual references to plans and people. He wanted to meet Titus at Nicopolis. There were several cities with that name, but most think it was the capital of western Greece he referred to. That may be where he was arrested once more and returned to Rome to be killed the following year.

Paul ended with the encouragement that Christians need to lead productive lives. In contrast to divisive and difficult interactions, we need to be doing good.

*Am I able to forgive those unwilling to reconcile? Am I divisive? Am I productive?*

PHILEMON: CHRIST, OUR DELIVERER

September 29

Philemon 1:1-12 To my friend

Paul made a deeply personal request of his friend Philemon. He started with his appreciation for him as a co-worker and a kind man. He had a house church, probably in Colossae, and Paul and Timothy together wrote from Rome. It perhaps was at the same time he wrote the letter to the Colossians.

It is an important letter, the first Christian abolitionist act. At the time this letter was written, Roman law said that runaway slaves should be put to death. Paul wanted forgiveness for Philemon's runaway slave. The tradition is that Philemon listened to Paul and freed Onesimus who became the bishop of Ephesus after Timothy's death. He was taken again to Rome as a prisoner, testified before a judge, and was executed.

Jesus had said that we need to see him in anyone who is vulnerable--the ill, the hungry, the prisoners. In the culture of the day, it was easy not to apply this to slaves, and Paul was hoping Philemon would see that the brotherhood of the faith and seeing Jesus in all people would apply to his own slave.

This letter shows us a characteristic into which we can easily fall. We may be kindly, godly people working for God and miss a major contradiction in our behavior because of a cultural blind spot. We may mistreat people casually and without awareness. This letter focuses on such a contradiction.



*Do I see Christ in all people? Do I show kindness and respect to all no matter their circumstances?*

September 30

Philemon 1:13-25 Take my request

Paul asked Philemon to receive his former slave with the same respect he would have offered to Paul himself. He offered to pay any debt, though not so subtly pointed out the spiritual debt Philemon owed him. Also not so subtle was the accompanying letter to the Colossians that Christ lives in all of us, slaves included (Colossians 3:11)

Jesus' crucifixion occurred on Passover, the celebration of the Exodus from slavery. His work on the cross thus became a work of liberation, and slavery an analogy to our spiritual reality. This book reinforces that the gospel is supposed to be a gospel of liberation. Jesus redefined those who come to believe in him as his brothers. Paul redefined a believing slave as his brother, a beloved brother. How could Christians have gone so far backward from that first century affirmation to the cruelty of our own history? Worse yet, how could they have invoked God's blessing and found Biblical justification for it? The cruelty of our history of slavery contradicted Jesus' and Paul's calls to brotherhood.

Today, if we are white, we need to listen carefully to our black and brown brothers and sisters and learn how to repair the past and make the present more just. If we are people of color, we need to continually appeal for more comprehension by white brothers and sisters.

An analogy could be made to one of our hot topics today. Onesimus was a lawbreaker by having run from his master. Today we have millions who crossed our borders illegally. Whatever happens regarding their legal status, we must remember this story and receive them as we would have received Paul. We continue to live with deep contradictions.

*Am I grieved by the sin of racism? Do I work for the liberation of oppressed people?*