



*Together at the
Foot of the Cross
Part 1*

GLORIA DEI LUTHERAN CHURCH

Together at the Foot of the Cross

Part 1

Lent Devotional from
Gloria Dei Lutheran Church
2023

Written by
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Daily Devotions Questions located on last page of
this booklet.

Day One - Ash Wednesday, February 22nd

“Admitting You’re Weak”

Read Romans 5:6-11

Growing up as a male of the species, alongside all other men of course, I struggle with admitting the fact that I am weak. Don't get me wrong, age and stage have brought some seriously diminished moments and a generous serving of “humble pie” in that regard. Age and stage have reminded me of the truth of the old saying *“The old grey mare just ain't what she used to be,”* and in that regard, those lessons seem to be coming closer together day by day. The truth is, the hard reality of “weakness” will find its way into the life of every single person, no matter what you try to do to stave it off. You just have to be prepared for it...whether a man or a woman...life lived in this world will prove that every single person on the planet is in fact, weak.

But I say it that way because in truth, all of us share in common a deep-seated weakness, a weakness that is in the life of every man, woman and child from the strongest of the strong to the weakest of the weak. We are all born with a common weakness, one that doesn't care how young or old you are, and simply cannot be overcome by your own strength or will or desire. In fact, the weaknesses brought on by aging are only symptoms of the true weakness that lies deep in the heart of every person. The weakness Paul speaks of here in Romans five is a weakness that plagues all of our bodies and does so from our conception in the womb until we die and are entombed. In our text Paul uses the term “weak” but when he does it is intended to point us to the reality of our reality, namely, we are all, together, as he defines this weakness, “ungodly;” “unrighteous;” “sinners;” and therefore “enemies” of God. Our true weakness is our sinful human nature and that weakness is far more frightening than anything “father-time” can throw our way. We are all ungodly, unrighteous, sinners and enemies of God and therefore...we are also all “weak.” But admitting you're weak, that is, admitting you're an ungodly, unrighteous sinner and therefore an enemy of God, is the key to understanding the amazing grace of Jesus given to us! Notice what Paul writes here, *“While we were still weak...at the right time Christ died for the ungodly!”* Paul is reminding us that we weren't “strong” or “godly”...or perfect or pure or righteous in any way!

When the Lord looked at us, He didn't see someone worthy of His love, affection and attention, but someone who needed, and yes, desperately needed, His love and affection and attention and therefore His

amazing grace as well! God is so good to us in that He sent His Son to stand in our place and to atone for our sins...even though we didn't deserve it whatsoever! In truth, a great way to look at our weakness and what God has done for us through Christ, is to recognize that Christ, as God Almighty, became weak in the person of Jesus, so that we who are weak, could, through Him, become strong in God's sight. Paul would write about Christ becoming weak in 2Corinthians 8:9 *"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich."* This passage presents our situation through a different metaphor to be sure, but it works just the same! He became "poor" and we become "rich!" He became "weak" and we become "strong" in and through Him!

Okay then...I may be a male of the species and I may struggle with admitting my physical and cognitive weaknesses, but I am more than happy to admit my sin-driven weakness and lean on and depend upon the strength that God alone can provide through our Lord Jesus Christ! I'm happy to say I can't do it on my own! I'm more than willing to admit that I do not have the strength or ability or capability to get myself into heaven or cleanse myself from my sin. None of us do. None of us ever will! I'm willing to admit it...I'm happy to admit it...so...how about you? For the whole of this Lenten Season, beginning on this Ash Wednesday, let's all stop, each and every one for the forty days of this journey, and admit that we are weak! But let's also remember and celebrate every single day of this Season and beyond, that the Lord Jesus took my weakness into Himself in order that He might give me His everlasting, never-ending strength both now and in heaven forevermore! Thank you, Jesus, for taking on our weakness! Thank you, Jesus, that we are made strong by You! Amen?

Day Two—Thursday, February 23rd

“Justified by His Blood”

Read Romans 5:6-11 (again)

Many years ago, one of the members in our Arizona congregation, committed himself to an Old Testament reading plan that had him paging closely through the chapters and verses of the first half of the Bible. He told me how great it was to immerse himself in the Word of God period, but also to do so in the particular Testament he was least familiar with. Truth is, most Christians don't know all that much about the Old Testament and he admitted that he was no exception to that rule. He felt he knew the *New Testament* fairly well, but really didn't have as good a handle on the *Old Testament* and wanted to not only know it better, but furthermore understand the connection between the two Testaments and how the Old Testament pointed to the Christ of the New.

When he had gotten most of the way through his Old Testament tour, he stopped me one Sunday and said “Pastor Joe...there is just so much blood in the Old Testament!” To which I quickly responded “Yes, yes there is!” He was spot on in his comment because there most certainly was a lot of blood spilled as recorded on the pages of the Old Testament! The Old Testament in general is in fact a “bloody-mess” (to use a British term)! Actually, the sacrificial system would be better said to be a “bloody-mass,” and all of it, every drop of the blood, was spilled at God's command, design and plan because of our fall into sin. Not only does the Old Testament testify to the mess we've made of the world by chronicling the violence and degradation of humanity, but furthermore, the answer to that violence and degradation required the massive taking of life, the spilling of blood, the continual and seemingly never-ending train of animal sacrifices for the sin of the believers.

Even if you've not read the Old Testament or read it closely, I think you understand...the life of the creature is in the blood, and therefore giving up the blood the animal means, giving up the life of the animal. Here's the way the Old Testament speaks about the sacrificial system: “*For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life,*” (Leviticus 17:11).

Pay close attention to the fact that the giving of the blood not only gave up the life of the animal, that's obvious, but the giving of the life of the animal through the blood then made "atonement" or payment for the sins of the person. In other words, the animal gave up its blood and its life so that the person didn't have to. The animal stood as substitute in the place of the sinful human. The Lord tells us, "*The wages of sin is death*" in Romans 6:23 to remind us that the penalty for our sin requires our life to be given up...both now but also for eternity. The substitutionary death of the animal kept the sinner from having to give up his or her own life for their sin while maintaining the truth of God's Word "*the wages of sin is death.*" However, we must also remember that the Bible says this regarding the Old Testament sacrificial system: "*The blood of bulls and goats can never take away sin,*" (Hebrews 10:4). The problem with the Old Testament sacrificial system was that it simply "covered up sins" and therefore had to be repeated day after day, week after week, year after year. Even the High-Festival, Yom Kippur, was only a "covering up of the sins" which is of course, what "Yom Kippur" means in Hebrew... "The Day of Covering."

What we needed, but furthermore required, was a permanent solution to sin, and so here enters Paul's words from Romans five: "*Since, therefore, we have now been justified by His blood, much more shall we be saved by Him from the wrath of God,*" (Romans 5:9). Paul reminds us that thankfully we are "justified" and "saved" by the blood of Jesus! Jesus spilled His blood to cleanse us from our sin and do so permanently...not just covering it up and doing so repeatedly year after year. What Jesus has done for us is spelled out in the book of Hebrews this way: "*He entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption,*" (Hebrews 9:12). Jesus provided an "eternal redemption" or as John the Baptist would say it "*Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29). Jesus spilled His precious blood at the cross for you and me and His precious blood takes away our sin, and yes, justifies us, which means "makes us righteous in God's sight." Jesus' spilled blood makes us righteous in God's sight, removing our sin and guilt and making us worthy of heaven itself and life-everlasting. Thank you, Jesus, for spilling your precious blood for me! Thank you, Jesus, that we are justified by your blood! Amen?

Day Three—Friday, February 24th
“Reconciled”,
Read Romans 5:6-11 (again)

If you’ve ever had a fight with someone and thereby had a relationship go south, you know how painful and difficult it can be until that relationship is reconciled and the two of you are back together and the friendship is restored to the rhythm you once had. Admittedly, sometimes, you don’t want to reconcile, and in your anger and frustration you are driven to say “I just don’t care if we’re ever friends again!” But more often than not, you do care... and the rift is painful, and the divide is hard, and the situation keeps you up at night, wanting to do whatever it takes to fix the problem and have the friendship back again. It may be that you need to admit that you were wrong and swallow your pride and simply ask for forgiveness. It may be that you were at fault and you simply have to say “I shouldn’t have said that!” or “I shouldn’t have done that!” and make amends and begin the healing process.

Interestingly though, when you’ve had a fight with someone and it’s not your fault, you may want the relationship healed, but in truth, there ain’t no way you’re making the first move! After all, the other person was the one who did something wrong, not you! They were the ones who caused the rift and they should be the ones then to fix the rift! You can come to believe with all of your heart that they need to make the first move and ask for forgiveness and get the healing process into motion. You know full well that’s how we often think and feel...more than that, you know full well that’s often also how we act! I know I’m guilty as charged. I have a feeling you know you’re guilty as charged too. All of us have, at times, ignored the blessings of the friendship, and instead held onto the anger and frustration, choosing to stay mad and stay away.

I mention that because in our text from Romans five, Paul talks about our fractured relationship with God as He writes this, “*More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ... through whom we have now received reconciliation,*” (Romans 5:11). Reading that you might say “No, Pastor Joe, this isn’t talking about a fractured relationship, it’s talking about the reconciliation that God has brought us through Jesus...right?” Indeed it is. But implicit in the word “reconciliation” is of course the idea of fractured relationships. In fact, God would move Isaiah to write this about the Old Testament children of God: “*...your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear,*” (Isaiah 59:2).

Of course this text from Isaiah is a reminder of the ungodly behavior of the Israelites of Isaiah’s day, but it’s also a text that reminds us of the truth about every human being. Our sins have

created a rift between us and our God. Our sins have fractured the relationship we had with Him. Our sins have brought a separation between us and our God and that separation is both in time and for eternity.

Let me make sure you hear me...we caused the problem, separation, and the rift. We brought the separation between us and our God. But even though that's true, Paul reminds us here that Jesus came to us...Jesus ran to us...and He did so to fix our relationship with Him and bring us reconciliation with God! Notice that Paul tells us that we have received reconciliation but how? He reminds us "how" when he writes "*through...our Lord Jesus Christ.*" In our fractured relationship with God, Jesus was the one who made the first move, who brought us reconciliation, even though Jesus wasn't at fault whatsoever. Jesus never had a moment where He would have to say "I'm sorry for saying/doing that!" Jesus was the pure and perfect, sinless Son of God! Jesus was God in the flesh! I think you realize that since Jesus didn't cause the rift and we did, He had no reason or obligation to come to us whatsoever. God could have crossed His almighty arms and said "They were the ones to cause the problem, they should be the ones to fix the problem!" He could have been mad at us and stayed mad at us until we came groveling on our knees to Him and made amends by admitting we were wrong. But He didn't. He was the one to seek us out and He was the one to bring reconciliation to our relationship! He was the one to come to us in the Person of Jesus Christ and more than that, at the cross, endure separation from God to heal our relationship! Remember what Jesus said on the cross "*My God, my God why have you forsaken me?*" Jesus was forsaken and separated from God so that we would not have to be. Think about it Christian, our relationship with God was so important to Him that He would do anything, including dying in our place, to restore the relationship to what it was in the Garden with Adam and Eve prior to the tree. If you've ever doubted the "amazingness" of Amazing Grace...just think about that. So to speak, God "stayed up at night" wanting to bring us back to Himself, wholeheartedly desiring to bring us back to the relationship we once had with Him...and so He did. At just the right time, in His perfect timing, He reconciled our relationship with Him through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ! Thank you, Jesus, that you made the first move! Thank you, Jesus, that you have reconciled us! Thank you, Jesus, for a relationship made right through you! And maybe that's saying something to you about the relationships that are broken in your life? Maybe you should just make the first move instead of staying mad and being separated from the friend or loved one...even if it was their fault? I do believe that's what Jesus would want, because that is indeed what Jesus has done for us! Amen?

Day Four—Saturday, February 25th

“Only Mostly Dead?”

Read Ephesians 2:1-10

One of my all-time favorite films is the Rob Reiner movie known as “Princess Bride.” If you haven’t seen it, it’s a marvelously funny and yet also curiously odd film. Wikipedia says this about it: *“Based on the novel by William Goldman, The Princess Bride is both a parody and an homage to the fairy-tale genre. It’s a perfect blend of humor, wit, action, fantasy, and romance. The most striking thing about The Princess Bride is the way Goldman frames his narrative – as a story within a story.”* As you watch the movie Princess Bride, it pretends to be a children’s movie but it really isn’t only that...it’s a film that all ages will enjoy, but one that the adults in the room will likely get more out of...especially the humor.

All that as set-up, in the movie one of the lead characters, named “Westley,” dies a hard and torturous death at the hands of the secondary-antagonist, and terribly evil, “Count Rugen.” In an effort to bring Westley back from the dead, his friends bring his “dead body” to a man named “Miracle Max” so that Max, the Miracle Worker, can bring him back to life. When he sees Westley, Miracle Max scoffs at the pair of friends who brought him for healing and pronounces something very unexpected when he does. Miracle Max tells the pair that Westley isn’t dead, but proclaims “Aren’t you so smart... he’s not dead, he’s only mostly dead.” Only *mostly* dead? Of course the line is part of the comedy of the movie itself, but we know that while it’s humorous, it’s also ridiculous...you’re either dead, or, well, you’re not dead...there’s no “mostly” or in-between status. Similarly, it’s often said this way “You’re either pregnant or you’re not, there’s no partially pregnant”...and so yes, you’re either dead or you’re not!

Now, I bring it up because of our familiar reading from Ephesians 2:1-10. Paul writes those familiar words “...*you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked...*” (Ephesians 2:1). Paul is clear here, our sinful human nature brings a real, terrible, spiritual deadness to us. Paul is clear here, every human being, because of their sin nature, is “dead.” By that he doesn’t mean to say that we as sinners will die, although that’s true too, instead he means in this instance that all human beings are dead to the things of God.

Curiously then, though many Christians know this passage and know it well, they nonetheless see themselves as only “mostly dead.”

By that, I mean many Christians don't take this passage seriously or to heart. Most Christians fail to see the death Paul is speaking of as a real, terrible, spiritual death. Most Christians read quickly past this part of God's Word, missing its import and even when they dig deep and explore God's Word in depth, they still struggle to believe that what is written is true. Let me ask you to think about that in regard to your own understanding of human beings and God. Do you view your sinful human nature as something that has made you "spiritually dead" or do you view it more as a minor incumbrance to your ability to follow God? Do you view your sinful human nature as a simple "propensity to sin" or do you understand that it is indeed being really, fully and genuinely...dead to Him? I must admit it's not uncommon to struggle with this idea of spiritual deadness. You wouldn't be alone in thinking little of your sin and by extension, little of the death that it brings. But I bring up the truth of and the depth of your spiritual deadness, to remind you of the amazing truth of your spiritual life! Notice what Paul writes just after the announcement of our "deadness:" *"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved..."* Ephesians 2:4,5. Paul opens this section by saying *"...you WERE dead in your trespasses and sins..."* and he does so because for the Christian, our deadness is a past-tense item. To be sure, all of us struggle with sin and will the whole of our life but in Christ, the spiritual death that we've all inherited has been turned on its head and we are "made alive" as we are "born-again" through Him. In fact, though we struggle with sin, a reminder that we are absolutely not "only mostly dead," for the Christian, we are also reminded that we're not "only mostly alive" either! In Christ, we are indeed truly alive, genuinely alive, and we're made alive by the mercy and grace of God in Christ! Praise you, Jesus, for dying and rising for us...praise you, Jesus, for making us alive in you! Amen?

Sunday Devotion—February 26th—Sundays in Lent are celebrations of the Resurrection and as such are not included in the devotions for Lent. Our theme for this weekend is "WE Remember" from Revelation 2:1-7; Luke 18:9-14. Consider the theme and read ahead to further bless your worship experience!

Day Five—Monday, February 27th

“All Inclusive”

Ephesians 2:1-10 (again)

One of the accolades about resorts or cruises that I hear from folks who travel a lot, is the phrase “all inclusive,” I think most of you know what that means, if not by experience, probably by word of mouth. Of course, the vocables are easy...the phrase “all inclusive” simply means that there’s no aspect of the vacation that’s left out, it’s all...not some or part or a little...it’s all inclusive regarding everything you need and everything you’ll experience. No matter what you do or what you experience, you’re not bound to pay more, it’s an “all inclusive vacation” and therefore the bill has already been paid. The way to understand that phrase is to think of it this way: You’re not going to go to dinner and get another bill from the hotel, resort or cruise ship for that dinner. You’re not going to belly up to the bar and have them ask you to pay for your drinks at the end of the night. You’re not going to go on an experience from the hotel, resort or cruise ship and have your credit card charged for that experience. Everything at the venue you’ve chosen to do is included because you have been blessed with an “all inclusive” vacation.

At the end of our ten verse section from Ephesians two, we come across verses that have been quoted so many times they are virtually memorized by Christian people. I know I could quote these verses when I was just a young man...almost droningly rote to me...*“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast,”* (Ephesians 2:8,9). In my mind, as a young man and even as a young church worker, what this verse meant to say is that “grace” is God’s work and “faith” is then my work. Of course I knew that God gives us His grace as a gift and that gift is given through the finished work of Christ. Sometimes grace is used as an acronym “God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense” or G.R.A.C.E. and that’s the truth of it... God gave us in Christ everything we need for everlasting, never-ending life in heaven with Him. We are saved from sin and sinfulness by His Son’s atoning death on the cross and His miraculous resurrection from the dead gives us new life in Him (see Romans 6:1-4).

But where our minds go next is that’s I’m saved by God’s grace in Christ, but the faith to appropriate that grace is MY faith, MY doing, MY part in this salvation gig of Christianity. God does His part and I do my part and the two meet with a one-way ticket to paradise...right?

Well, this is where the “all-inclusive” part of our “trip to paradise” with God comes into play regarding Ephesians 2:8-10. You see, the language here is very clear...in the Greek language that is. The Greek language, which Paul used to write these words, makes it clear that what the Holy Spirit was saying through Paul in these famous verses was that both “grace” and “faith” are in fact “...*the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one can boast.*” God gives us His grace in Christ and no true Christian will dispute that. God gives us not only the forgiveness of sins by punishing Christ in our place, but also gives us the merits of His righteous and sinless life. We’re forgiven of sins by His passive righteousness at the cross and we’re given His merits through His active righteousness in through His perfect life. All grace. All God.

But He also gives us the faith to believe that we’re forgiven by Christ and the faith to receive by that same faith the righteousness God gives. One of my professor’s once said “Grace is the gift of God and faith is the hands to receive that gift...but even the hands of faith are pushed up by the Holy Spirit to receive the gift of Grace.” Let me give you another passage that says something very similar: “*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to His great mercy, He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...*” (1Peter 1:3). Take note of the underlined. “He caused us to be born again...”. He gives us His grace to be saved but He also gives us the faith to receive it! In fact, let me give you some very important words in this regard from 1Corinthians 12:3 “...no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit.” The Bible is clear, no one can receive the grace of God without God’s Holy Spirit’s intervention.

The best part of all this is? You finally get to go to what is truly paradise...not some vacation destination claiming to be “paradise.” Some day, at your death or the Second Coming, you will be in paradise forever with Christ! And you can rest assured that it is indeed “all inclusive” as you await that day for the best and never-ending vacation of all! Thank you, Jesus, for doing it all! Amen?

Day Six—Tuesday, February 28th

“God’s Artwork”

Read Ephesians 2:1-10 (again)

I am an artist or a “creative” at heart. I love to create artistic “things” and have done so in a variety of mediums over my life-time. To be sure, I haven’t created any “Rembrandts” in my artistic ventures, but I do love art. In truth, while I do enjoy creating artistic things myself, I really enjoy collecting art much more. I collect art that is Christ-centered and gives glory to Him and if you’ve been in my office or home you know the truth of it. I genuinely love to not only see what the artist chose to make but also why they chose to make it. I love to pour over the intricacies of their pieces and do my best to understand what the original and ongoing purpose of the artwork is. While art is often defined by the person encountering the piece in the moment, the truth is, the creator of the art had something in mind, some purpose, some statement, when the art was originally made.

I bring that to you today because of Ephesians 2:10 and the words “We are His workmanship.” The word “workmanship” here has been defined for me by theologians who know more than I do as a “piece of artwork.” Paul tells us here that we are God’s “artwork” and we are His artwork from the first to the last. We started this discussion in our last devotion, based on Ephesians 2:8,9, where we were reminded that we receive God’s grace by faith and that both His grace and His faith are given to us by His Holy Spirit and in our baptism into Christ. We remembered that we’re very blessed to have an “all inclusive trip to Paradise” all paid for, as well as all delivered by, God Himself! But when we cross over from Ephesians 2:8,9 into Ephesians 2:10, we can find ourselves thinking, “Finally, this is my part in this salvation gig!” After all, Paul speaks of “good works” here and Jesus would say in Matthew chapter five, *“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven,”* (Matthew 5:14-16). Once again take note of the underlined. What we read is that you and I are the light of the world. You and I are also the shiner of that light. Clearly then, it’s also MY good works and that people then ultimately see what I AM doing...right?

Well, let me take you back to Ephesians 2:10: *“For we are His*

workmanship...created in Christ Jesus for good works...which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” You can read it yourself but let me remind you who the operator here is yet again. We were “...*created in Christ Jesus for good works,*” meaning there is a Creator, or in this instance a re-Creator of who we are in this world. Our works were also “*prepared beforehand*” but prepared beforehand by whom? By you? Nope, by God. So Paul is reminding us that our Creator God recreated us in Christ Jesus to do the good works that He prepared before the foundation of the world for us to...for us to simply “*walk in them*”...or...simply abide in and live in, the “good works” that God ordained for us to do. Let me take you back to the beginning of this verse then... “*We are His workmanship...*” We are His piece of artwork. We are His design, His creation, His re-creation...from the first to the last and any good works we do are done in and through Him as His Holy Spirit uses us in this world to shine the light of Christ (John 8:12) and give Him glory. As Jesus said it in the Matthew five verses above, “*Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good works and...*” what? See your good works and “give glory to your Father who is in heaven!” He gets the glory because we are the artwork of His creative and redemptive hands!

So I mentioned at the outset of this devotion that I love art and seeing not only what is made, but why...why did the artist form what he/she formed? I'll ask you to think about that then as you consider your own Christian existence. Indeed, you were created in Christ Jesus to give God glory through your good works...but I also know that each and every “piece of artwork” that God makes is unique to the person He has made. So why did God re-create you? Said differently, how is God using you to glorify His holy name today, this week, this month and beyond?

Thank you, Jesus, for coming to us and thank you Jesus for using us to glorify you in this world! Amen?

Day Seven—Wednesday, March 1st

“He kept me out of jail!”

Read 1Timothy 1:12-17/Romans 5:10

One of the things I'm known for saying regarding my life's work as a clergyman is “God made me a Pastor in order to keep me out of jail!” Of course, it is just a joke on my part, but it does get at what is actually a fact in my life...namely, that I know the path I was on and I know that God rescued me from the jaws of Satan and a one-way-trip to Hell itself. I was raised a Christian but had strayed pretty far off the mark and therefore believe with all my heart that apart from the intervention of our Lord and Savior, I'd have walked away from the faith in total. Yes, He rescued me from the local jail, but He also rescued me from the eternal jail as well! God was good to me and brought me from death to life, keeping me from a wasted life on earth and an eternity apart from Him. In fact, because of what I know to be true about myself, I share in the “thankfulness” sentiment from St. Paul as recorded in our text for today. Paul definitely made my worldly ways and my ungodly antics look mild since, as Paul wrote it about himself here in 1Timothy, “...formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent...” (1Timothy 1:13). Paul was very forthright about his life prior to the time that Jesus took him as His own on the Damascus road. He was a mess but he was worse than that, he was an avowed opponent of Jesus! He was doing whatever he could to derail Christianity and put a stop what was thought to be a new and erroneous sect of the Jewish faith that was spreading like wildfire. As recorded in Acts 7:54-60, Paul stood by while men stoned to death the disciple known as Stephen.

You have to be one hardened individual to willingly encourage other people to throw rocks at someone until they die. And yet he did... holding the cloaks of those who stoned the innocent follower of Jesus, so that they could wind up all the further and throw it all the harder. Of course, Paul, then known as Saul, would shortly meet Jesus on the road and hear those words “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?*” (Acts 9:4). Paul had become an enemy of God Himself! Good thing I'm nothing like Paul, right? I'm just a run-of-the-mill sinner and not a blasphemer, persecutor and insolent opponent...or enemy of God, right? Well, understand that there is no such thing as a “run-of-the-mill” sinner.

We may not have approved of the stoning of one of the Lord's servants, or attempted to snuff-out Christianity, but in our sin

and sinfulness we are in fact enemies of God. Romans 5:10 is the clearest passage I can take you to in this regard. Paul is reminding the Romans of God's grace and mercy in Christ towards all believers when he writes: "*For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life,*" (Romans 5:10). But while Paul reminds us of everyone's status as a result of our sin, Paul also reminds us of the grace of God! We were God's enemies, Romans 5:10 is clear, but Romans 5:10 is also clear that "...we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son!" As our text says it "The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost," (1Timothy 1:15). Indeed, in a very real sense, our Lord Jesus came into this world to keep us all out of jail. And by faith in Him and baptism into His name, we are given the "get out of jail free card" and will instead, live in His Kingdom and Paradise, forever!

Thank you Jesus that you rescued from ourselves us and set us free from an eternity apart from you! Amen?

Day Eight—Thursday, March 2nd
“A Good Example”
Read 1Timothy 1:12-17 (again)

Not too many years ago, professional athletes were being called out for their sometimes not-so-nice-behavior. People recognized that like it or not, these public figures...football, basketball, soccer, etc. professionals...were an influence on their kids, and therefore many were calling for these athletes to get their act together, clean up their lives, and show the admiring kids something better. Some of the athletes pushed back saying very openly and sometimes forcefully, “I am not a role model!” They most certainly didn’t want to change their lifestyle, but they also most certainly didn’t want to be held-up as someone people, child or adult, should look to as an example.

In our text, the Apostle Paul isn’t pushing back on that idea at all, but speaks of his life being an example to others...but interestingly... it’s not for his *good* behavior. In verse sixteen, Paul writes these words: “*The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display His perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in Him for eternal life,*” (1Timothy 1:15,16). Paul freely admits that if anyone was known for his bad behavior, it was Paul himself as he calls himself “the foremost” of sinners. You can also see this through what Paul records about himself in Galatians One: “*They only were hearing it said, ‘He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.’ And they glorified God because of me,*” (Galatians 1:23,24). Not much of an example...he tried to “destroy” the Christian faith...what?

I bring you to this point because in truth, the “example” Paul was to the Christian community and beyond, actually had nothing to do with his good behavior and in a sense, nothing to do with Paul whatsoever. Paul admits his bad behavior in our text and elsewhere. His bad behavior was so big and so bold it was frankly, hard to miss. His life was no example whatsoever.

But when he claims to be “an example” he isn’t pointing to himself, but to God who chose to give him grace in spite of his bad behavior! Paul was indeed an example to the community, as he writes about who his life was influencing in the words “...*those who were*

to believe in (Jesus) for eternal life.” Paul was indeed an example, a wonderful example of God’s amazing grace given to every sinner... even those like Paul, who are “the foremost” as he said about himself.

And so it is with you Christian! Yes, remember the amazing grace of our amazing God who has qualified you to inherit everlasting, never-ending life with Him! Remember that it is by God’s unconditional love and mercy that you are saved and thank Him everyday for that unconditional love and mercy too! But also remember, you are an example, just like Paul. You are an example to others of what God does for us! There is no one outside God’s grace and people can see that in your life as you share with them the truth of the mercy of God given to you! There is no one so bad that God won’t bring them salvation and people can encounter that truth through your life. You are a possessor of God’s grace but you are also an example of that very thing. Live in His grace. Relish His grace. But tell people of His grace given to you, showing yourself to be an example to the believers in Jesus yet to come. Thank you, Jesus, for giving us grace! Thank you, Jesus, for using us to show your grace to others! In Jesus’ name, amen?

Day Nine—Friday, March 3rd
“The Paycheck Problem”
Read Galatians 2:15-21

I started working for my father when I was very young. Dad owned convenience stores and I was behind the counter and ringing up groceries, wine and beer by the time I was just twelve years old. It was very good for me to learn to be responsible by being on time and making sure to remember my work schedule. But I also quickly learned an important and life-long lesson...namely, if you work, they pay you! Let me tell you how excited I was to find out that the time spent in one of my dad's stores would net me, not just a pat on the head from my dad, but also a paycheck and ultimately, cash in my pocket! I actually still have my first paystub in an old photo album my mom made for me, and it shows that I grossed a whopping \$75 for the two-week period! Nonetheless, seventy-five dollars or not, I got a paycheck and I understood the principle well...you work and you get paid!

Of course, most people understand the concept that I learned early on. Most people have a grasp on this...if you want a paycheck you have to do something to earn that paycheck. But while it's something most people understand and an important life-lesson, the principle is also something that hamstringing many people when it comes to our faith in Jesus. Because we're used to earning things, we're suspect of anything, anything whatsoever, that is said to be "free." We know we have to earn every little thing in our life...so much so we've adopted the saying "There is no free lunch!" So when Christianity says "It's free...completely and totally free!" we can live in disbelief over what we're hearing!

But this is where the Gospel shines brightly with the beacon of God's grace and mercy, because God's love, God's salvation, God's kingdom are in fact, all given to us absolutely, completely and totally free. Paul writes in our text: *"...yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified,"* (Galatians 2:16). Paul reminds us here that no one, not one single person, can be made right, or "justified" by the good things that they do. You are indeed made right with God but you are made right by God too. As Paul writes it above *"...a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ..."*. Our faith in Jesus, our life in Jesus, our life with Jesus forever, is all a free gift to us

regardless of the things we accomplish or fail to accomplish in this world.

Now, it's important to note here that while salvation is free to us, it wasn't free to Jesus. The reason we get the "paycheck" of forgiveness of sins and life-everlasting is because Christ did the work, did the heavy lifting for us! Paul ends this section by saying these important words: "*I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose,*" (Galatians 2:21). The wording here is important. Paul doesn't nullify the grace of God because if our righteous standing before God was gained by the things we do or don't do, then, as he writes it here, "*...Christ died for no purpose*" but it reads straight across in Greek this way "*...Christ died for free.*" But you know that He didn't die for free. You know that He paid an unfathomable price for our salvation. He suffered an unimaginable death on the cross for you and for me. He stood in our place as the substitutionary sacrifice for our sins. In other words, you know that He did the work...in order that you can get paid for it! Thank you Jesus for doing the work! Thank you, Jesus, for giving us the paycheck! Amen?

Day Ten—Saturday, March 4th
“Where My Eye Lands”
Read Galatians 2:15-21 (again)

In general, as Lead Pastor, I am in the mix on giving feedback and approvals for publications and on-line information, both the content and artwork. I’m asked to give my honest critique on images and layouts before the announcement (or whatever it is) is put into print or online. One of the things my creative staff hears from me in those instances is “My eye is landing on _____.” What I mean when I say that is that what I’m looking at is printed and laid-out in such a way that my eye, what I see foremost, is driven in a certain direction in relation to the piece I’m looking at. Sometimes that means asking them to re-do the piece because where my eye is landing on the piece doesn’t fit what they are trying to convey through the piece. Sometimes where my eye is landing on the particular art or copy is spot-on and I green-light the project for print or online publication.

Admittedly though, while I am a creative at heart and qualified to give commentary on artwork, (see day six devotion for that), my comments to my co-workers are in fact biased because they are based on what I personally like and do not like. While on top of my creative brain, my years in ministry give me a good handle on what works and doesn’t work, the truth is, my comments and subsequent directions about the publication or art are indeed driven by my own likes and dislikes, as well as, my personal feelings in the moment.

Now, I admit that to you because in fact, all of us do that very same thing when it comes to the reading of Scripture. Our eye will inevitably land on the part of the text that we are biased about or the part of the text that we want to hear or for that matter, one that meets our need in the moment.

Need peace? All of sudden you’re seeing “peace” verses everywhere you read in the Bible. Need God’s presence? “*Lo, I am with you always even to the very end of the age,*” (Matthew 28:20) passages jump off of the page at you! And that principle would be true of the very famous and much-loved verse found here in Galatians chapter two and verse twenty. Who doesn’t love what Paul wrote here “*Christ who lives in me?*” We love that verse! Christ lives in me! Jesus is with me! I’m never separated from Him...because He is indeed with me always, right here, in my very body and soul!

But I'd suggest to you that we see that part of verse twenty, because that's what we want to see...it's where our eye lands in other words. Did you notice that verse twenty has a little more to it than that? This is how the whole verse reads: "*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me,*" (Galatians 2:20). To which we all say "Wow! There's actually a lot more to that verse!" Indeed. "*I have been crucified with Christ...it is no longer I who live.*" The Holy Spirit is reminding us here that we live the penitential life every day...a life of dying to self and giving up my wants and my desires for something far better, namely, the pure and perfect will of Jesus. "The life I now live I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me..." Our life is not lived for ourselves or lived to ourselves, but instead lived for Him who died and was raised. Yes, indeed, there is much more to this verse than first meets the eye!

But there is also this reminder...it actually does all go back to where our eyes landing in these verses..."*Christ who lives in me!*" I know it's where our eyes land, but it's also the key to understanding this passage. Dying to self? It only can be done because of "*Christ who lives in me!*" Living for the crucified and risen one? It can only be done because of "*Christ who lives in me!*" In this important instance, where our eye lands exactly where it should be, on "*Christ who lives in me!*" Thank you, Jesus, that you lived for me...but thank you, Jesus, that you live in me and through me too! Amen?

Day Eleven—Monday, March 6th

“Where did that come from?”

Read Psalm 51:1-12

Sometimes people will blurt out something and after the words come flying out of their mouth they belatedly realize that what they said didn't quite come out as they intended it to. They then further realize that what they said was in fact a shock to the people around them. To quell the surprise of their friends or family, the person who uttered the offensive word or phrase, will sometimes sheepishly say “Where did that come from?” Of course, sometimes it's the people who heard them say the offensive word or phrase that respond with shock and themselves ask the question, “Where did that come from?”

Our text for today's devotion found in Psalm 51 actually gives us the answer to that question. “Where did that come from?” is answered by verse five where King David writes “*Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.*” The New International Version gets at the truth of this verse in the way that it translates the Hebrew writing: “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” When we ask the question “Where did that come from?” in regard to any sinful behavior, our answer is also a reminder of who we are from birth, since it comes from deep within our sinful selves. I've often said it this way to parents who bring their children for baptism: “You don't have to teach your children to be bad, they are quite good at being bad. You in fact have to say to them the opposite, ‘Be good!’” But why do parents have to say that? Why do we have to encourage ‘good behavior’? You didn't teach them to be bad! Why are they so good at being bad? And the answer is? “*Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.*”

That's an important theological point to be grasped by here. We are sinners...no one will argue that. Of course, admittedly some will say we're “basically good,” but even if they espouse that about human beings, they won't normally deny our propensity to sin. We sure do know how to sin and pretty much everyone on the planet would agree with that! But Psalm 51 reminds us that we aren't sinners *because* we sin. That's a very important thing to understand and distinction to make...so, let me say that again...we are NOT sinners because we sin. Instead, we sin because we are sinners. The “actual sins,” as we call them, things like, hate, anger, lust, greed, prejudice, gossip...all those “actual sins” come from deep within a sinful human heart and are a product of who we are as sinners.

Those things that we do wrong are in fact swimming around in our sinful hearts and minds and simply find their way to the surface and do so regularly. Or as the Spirit moved David to write: "*Sinful from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.*" Indeed...indeed we are!

Think about that for a moment however. There's a reason I am so bold to proclaim that human beings are in no way "basically good." At the very core of who we are isn't goodness but instead a sinful human self and the sinfulness it produces. And...my sinful human self is quite good at making a mess of things. Again, at the very core of who we are isn't goodness, but a cesspool of sin that is simply waiting for the opportunity to bubble over and show its sinful self to whoever we encounter in that particular moment. Quoting from Paul in Romans Three "*All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.*" Romans 3:12.

Okay then...what do we do about that, especially as we encounter or come face-to-face with a holy and righteous God? Well, we simply rely on the truth of Psalm 51 again and David's words recorded here. Notice that while David recognizes our sin through the words of verse five, he also remembers that the only remedy for our sin is alone found in God's love and mercy. The Holy Spirit writes through David: "*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!*" (Psalm 51:1,2). When confronted by our sinful human nature and the sins it produces, we turn to God and rest in the forgiveness and peace we are given by Christ through the love and mercy of God found only in Him. His grace and mercy are always bigger than our sin and sinfulness! His grace and mercy in fact take away the guilt of our sin and set us in right standing before the holy and righteous God of the Universe!

But when considering our sin but also considering God's abundant mercy given us in Jesus, we then encounter yet another reason to say "Where did that come from?" Where did the mercy and grace come from for a sinner like me? The mercy and grace of God, the remedy for our sins we long for, came from Jesus and His precious blood shed on the cross! Thank you, Jesus, for your blood spilled for us! Thank you, Jesus, for giving us your love and grace and mercy! Amen?

Day Twelve—Tuesday, March 7th

“Excuse Me?”

Read Psalm 51:1-12 (again)

Sometimes what you happen to be reading in the Bible will cause you to say something akin to “Excuse me?” What I mean by that is that what you’re reading is something that just doesn’t sit well with you. Might be something you simply don’t understand. Also might be something that you understand but take offense at. And I mention it because we come across something like that in our text from Psalm 51. David writes those famous words in verse four, *“Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.”* While we understand that David is pouring himself out to God, we still want to say “Excuse me?” And we say “Excuse me?” because we understand that the persons David sinned against were Uriah the Hittite and his wife, Bathsheba...and not against God.

Since it’s a very familiar story, let me just give a brief description to remind you of what transpires as recorded in 2Samuel 11. David’s men and his armies are out fighting in battle. David the King was, for some reason, not with his men in battle. He is perusing his kingdom from the roof of his house and spies out a woman bathing and that woman’s name is Bathsheba. David asks about her and is told she is married to Uriah. David nonetheless ignores her marriage pledge and takes her as his own wife, getting her pregnant in the process. In order to cover up his iniquity, he sends for Uriah who was with the men in battle. Uriah comes to David but refuses to go down to his house and be with Bathsheba and instead stays with David, which clearly foiled the cover up David needed. Since Uriah refused, David has him effectively murdered by ordering him to the front lines of the battle. Uriah is struck down and Bathsheba becomes the King’s wife.

So...“excuse me” David! Your sin wasn’t against God, you sinned against Bathsheba in an abuse of power and you sinned against Uriah by taking his wife and then taking his life! In fact, the prophet Nathan seems to believe the same thing when he confronted David as recorded in 2Samuel 12. David sinned against Uriah and Bathsheba, and not against God. Right?

Well, this is a moment when we must remember that sinning against each other is sinning against God. We can never, ever say, “I just sinned against my neighbor...it had nothing to do with sinning against

God!” To that point, remember Saul, as in, the Apostle Paul, was sinning against God’s people by having them imprisoned and killed. He was of course most famous for having Stephen stoned to death! But what did Jesus say when He came to Saul on the roadway? When Jesus confronted Saul on the road to Damascus, He said this: “*Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting...me?*” (Acts 9:4). Persecuting and killing Christians was sinning against God. You see, we are called to love God with all of our heart, mind, soul and strength and called to love our neighbor as ourselves. The two go together. Loving God and loving neighbor...or indeed, sinning against God by sinning against our neighbor.

When we think of it that way, it changes how seriously we take our sins, doesn’t it? Knowing that our sin is always against God no matter what we do or don’t do, moves us to take our sin with distinct gravity and avoid it at all costs and seek God for His forgiveness when we blow it. Oh, and then, instead of saying “Excuse me?” as in a question, we can humbly and gently and softly ask Him “excuse me...,” as in a request of forgiveness. “Excuse me...,” a request for forgiveness from the person we’ve offended, but an even bigger request for forgiveness from our God. We cry out in humility saying “Excuse me Lord, please!” Or perhaps instead, we do so through the words of David: “*Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.*” Psalm 51:9...and thankfully, as He did with David, so He does for us! Thank you, Jesus, for your forgiveness when we hurt others! Thank you, Jesus, for your forgiveness when we hurt you! Amen?

Day Thirteen—Wednesday, March 8th

“A New Heart”

Read Psalm 51:1-12 (again)

“I feel like a brand new man!” “I feel like a completely different woman!” I’ve heard people say things close to that...maybe you have too...maybe you’ve even said those things as well! We understand that what the person means by the proclamation is that there has been some change in their life and the change they’ve experienced has, in a very real way, given them “new life” and therefore made them feel “brand new!” Something has happened in their life, an alteration of some former “thing,” and they’re then enabled then to say “I feel completely different!”

I bring it up because that’s in fact, exactly what every Christian can say about themselves! As a Christian you can say “I feel like a brand new man!” or “I feel like a completely different woman!” David gets at this when he writes those much loved words in verse ten: “*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me,*” (Psalm 51:10). Notice what God can do for the sinner, namely, recreate a man, woman or child by giving them a brand new heart and placing a right spirit within them, making them right with in His sight. God the Holy Spirit would use Ezekiel to write about this very thing in Ezekiel 36:26: “*And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.*” What beautiful imagery here! God removes our heart of stone and recreates us with a heart of flesh...in fact, placing *His* heart within us...given to us, to not only to love Him but also love our neighbor. Our spirit is renewed and our heart is recreated to love God and love neighbor in this world.

The caveat to that is that our old stone-like heart and our old-Adam-spirit don’t get removed when God does the recreating! Remember, when David wrote Psalm 51 he was already a believer, the King over Israel, and yet he struggled with sin greatly! Oh how we wish baptism not only gave us forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, but that it also removed our sinful human nature altogether...but it does not. We will battle with our sin-nature the whole of our lives and continually come to our Lord and Savior for love, mercy and forgiveness when we are bested by the “old Adam” as we call our sin-nature.

But David speaks into that here too. In verse twelve we read those wonderful words, “*Cast me not away from your presence, and take*

not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit,” (Psalm 51:11,12). When we come to Jesus in repentance for the times we’ve ignored Him and His Spirit, when we’ve lived our “old life” instead of our new, He nonetheless willingly recreates us yet again...and again...and again...and again. You know that you’re a brand new person in His sight through baptism and faith in Jesus, but you can also know that He willingly takes people who struggle with their “old self” and freely grants to them the renewal and forgiveness they need. We read of that very thing in 1 John 1:8-9, *“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”* He made you new in your baptism...but He also receives you and forgives you and makes you new each time you come to Him!

In a very real sense...you can live every day proclaiming “I feel like a brand new man!” or “I feel like a completely different woman” in and through your faith in the Lord Jesus and the forgiveness He provides! Thank you, Jesus, for giving us a new heart...for giving us your heart! Amen?

Day Fourteen—Thursday, March 9th

“What are you so happy about?”

Read Psalm 103:1-15

Have you ever come across one of those people that are clearly what we'd call a “happy person?” I'm not talking about a person that is occasionally happy, but one that is quite obviously overtaken by something in their lives that causes them, in the thick and the thin, to be unfazed by life's ups and downs. Probably a better term for me to use would be “joy-filled” person, rather than “happy,” since happy can be circumstantially motivated. No, not just a “happy person,” but one who no matter what comes their way, seems to be enjoying life and wearing the smile. Not that they are totally unaffected by life's downs when they want life's ups, but there just seems to be some amount of balance within them and from something deep down inside, something that keeps them at a very level and frankly, very wonderful joy-filled place. Since that's so rare in our day and time, a person like that can move and motivate us to say “What are you so happy about?”

For the Christian, the answer to “what are you so happy about?” is spoken of in our Psalm, Psalm 103:1-5. The Psalmist, David, writes these wonderful, and I also think, exuberant words: “*Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits...*” (Psalm 103:1,2). Clearly, in the moment, the Holy Spirit motivated David to be enthused and excited about his faith in the Lord God! You can't read Psalm 103:1,2 without hearing the joy and exaltation in David's voice...yes? It's almost as if he's joyfully shouting out the words “*Bless the LORD, O my soul and all that is within me, bless His holy name!*” Every fiber of David's being appears to have been overtaken with his love for God and that comes spilling out from and spilling over in his writing of Psalm 103.

And of course, the words of David are our words too! We who have come believe in the Lord Jesus and trust in Him just as much as David did, resonate with his words here: “*Bless the LORD, O my soul and all that is within me, bless His holy name!*” *We too bless Him to our very soul! We too bless His holy name!*

But why do we “bless His name?” What moved David and what moves and motivates us to do so? What's given us such love and adoration for our Lord? To get at an answer, we can just ask the same question...right? “What are you so happy about?” could be

applied to the words of Psalm 103 as well as David himself and those that are currently reading David's words too! What made David so happy and moved David to write "*Bless the Lord, O my soul!*"...and what moves us to cherish these words ourselves, claiming them as our own? Well, David writes this in response to the question: "*Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases...*" (Psalm 103:2,3). What was David so happy about? First and foremost the forgiveness that God alone possesses and the forgiveness that God alone can bring! What are we so happy about? None other than the very same thing...the grace of God found only in Jesus Christ, our crucified and risen Lord! True joy in this broken world is always found in the love that God has for us in Christ! True joy within then moves us show the world what it means to be Christian, possibly causing them to ask us "What are you so happy about?" Can't wait to give them our answer...how about you? Thank you, Jesus, for forgiveness! Thank you, Jesus, for grace! Amen?

Day Fifteen—Friday, March 10th

“Getting What I Deserve!”

Read Psalm 103:8-14

In many ways our society is entitled (and you should know, that’s both the younglings and the old-timers within our society...it’s not an “age thing”). The internet defines the word “entitled” in this way: “Believing oneself to be inherently deserving of privileges or special treatment.” I know younglings that think that way and I know old-timers that do too. What that really means is that regardless of age or stage, “entitled people” believe that they are *deserving* of certain “things” and their reasoning for feeling that they’re *deserving* is often simply “Just because!” In other words, they are purveyors of the mantra “I deserve it!” but there’s no real reason given as to why “I deserve it!”

I bring it up, because when it comes to Christianity, we are actually quite the opposite of entitled people. We, who hold the Christian faith, are not entitled people, but instead thankful people! By that I mean, thankful that we don’t receive what we deserve, or said more plainly, that we don’t receive the punishment that we deserve for our sins. David writes it this way when highlighting God’s attributes in Psalm 103:8&10, “*The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love...He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.*” Notice. Read verse ten closely. The fact that the Lord is merciful and gracious is proven in verse ten in that “*He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.*” Slow to anger? Abounding in steadfast love? Proven because “He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.” We’re indeed thankful for His grace, mercy, and stable, steadfast love! But in truth, we’re indeed thankful because we do not get what we deserve!

And we’re also thankful, because we understand all too well why we don’t get what we deserve. We don’t get what we deserve because the Lord Jesus got...what He did not deserve. David writes it this way: “*The LORD is merciful and gracious*”...no question God’s mercy and grace are where our forgiveness comes from. But we also know that His mercy and grace were shown to us and realized for us in the person and work of Jesus at the cross! We know what the Season of Lent is really all about, namely the cross of Christ, but the cross of Christ which was in fact suffered by Him for me and for you. He didn’t deserve it, but He nonetheless stood in our place, took our punishment, and received in His body on the tree the due

penalty for our error. Peter would write that very thing in 1Peter 2:24, *“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.”* By His sacrifice we are forgiven; by His wounds we are healed! Because of Jesus and His sacrifice for us, we do not get what we deserve!

That then changes how we live in this world! We are truly a thankful people...not an entitled one. We are thankful people...never demanding for ourselves but always giving to others as God has, in Jesus, already given to us! Thank you, Jesus, for dying in my place! Thank you, Jesus, for giving me your grace! Amen?

Day Sixteen—Saturday, March 11th

“Inside and Out”

Read Psalm 103:8-14 (again)

When someone understands you very well, they'll often say things like “I know you like the back of my hand,” or “I get you!” or, per our devotion title today, “I know you inside and out!” Whatever way the person gets at it, when someone says something about you like the above phrases, the idea is that regardless of the intricacies of your personality or seeming hiddenness of things within your heart and mind, the person making the declaration is indicating that they know you well and understand you completely. The person making the declaration about you is saying that they know you and understand you in a very deep and intimate way...“like the back of their hand” because they “get you” and yes, because in fact, they know you “inside and out!”

It almost seems ridiculous to do so, but I am nonetheless going to remind you that God has just such an intimate knowledge of us as His creatures, as children born of His creative hand. You understand the rule well: He is “God,” the Supreme Being, so obviously He knows everything...therefore God knows everything about you and He knows everything about you far ahead and long before it ever happens. Psalm 139 reminds us of this very thing when it says, “*Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether.*” Psalm 139:4. God knows us and understands us and does so, as you realize I'm sure, like no one else is able to on this planet. He knows you better than your parents; He knows you better than your spouse; He knows you better than your closest friend! He knows every single detail about you and in fact, even knows you better than you know you!

This is where our text becomes much more amazing to us as Christian people however. David writes, “*For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.*” (Psalm 139:14). He knows us like no one else does, therefore, He knows our weaknesses! He knows our propensity to sin! He knows every single one of our sinful thoughts, our wicked words and our unrighteous deeds! “*For He knows our frame and remembers...that we are dust!*” David effectively writes here by the power of the Holy Spirit, “He knows you...inside and out!”

But why did David write that in verse fourteen? He did so because of what the Holy Spirit moved him to write in verse thirteen: “*As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.*” Psalm 103:13 and then

David continues the thought: “For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.” Psalm 139:14. He understands us, He knows us “inside-out”, and as a result, He has compassion on us because of our “frame” and because we are “dust.” You’d think it the opposite, wouldn’t you? He knows us “inside-out” and so He has nothing but vitriol and judgment for our sin-saturated hearts and minds! But no, we’re told, He knows us inside-out but He loves us anyway...like a Father...and furthermore, through Christ, forgives our sins and sanctifies our lives and receives us as His children as well.

In fact, by the power of His Holy Spirit, He takes up residence within our sinful selves and then uses us in this world as He works from the “inside-out” in our lives, to bring His love and Fatherly compassion to our world. Thank you, Jesus, for knowing us and yet loving us in spite of us! Thank you, Jesus, for knowing us and yet having compassion on us as well! Amen?

Day Seventeen—Monday, March 13th

“Jekyll and Hyde”

Read Romans 7:15-25

I presume you know the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, but let me remind you of its plot and story-line. Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde are in fact two sides of the same coin, both found in body of the same person. Dr. Jekyll created a serum that when drunk, transformed him from Dr. Jekyll to Mr. Hyde. Dr. Jekyll was kind and gentle, but as Mr. Hyde he was the polar opposite and became a violent and out-of-control murderer. As time went by, Dr. Jekyll no longer had to drink the serum for the transformation to take place and he would at times, day or night, go from kind and gentle to violent, out-of-control and murderous...almost like the flip of a switch.

Now, I bring you there not to give you a lesson in late 1800's Gothic Novellas, as interesting as that may be, no, I bring you there to give you an image and illustration of our lives as Christians. In one of Paul's most well-known set of verses found here in Romans seven, the Apostle reminds us of what could be called the “Jekyll and Hyde” existence we live as Christian people. You likely resonate well with what Paul has written here, most Christians do, and they do because this is exactly what every Christian experiences day after day. Paul essentially holds up a mirror and let's us see the truth about ourselves, a truth we know all too well. Paul holds up a mirror and reminds us that there is “Mr. Hyde” in all of us and often, our own personal “Mr. Hyde” overtakes “Dr. Jekyll” at the flip of a switch and causes us to live in ways that are contrary to God's will and God's Word. Like Paul, we despise the truth of it, but like Paul we are also resigned to the truth of it...we can't change it, it is, what it is!

It's important to note something here however, Paul is not advocating *living* a “Mr. Hyde” existence and completely ignoring our true identity as “Dr. Jekyll.” Are there times when you “transform” and your “Mr. Hyde” takes over your “Dr. Jekyll?” Yes, and there always will be the whole of your life. Are there times when, to use a more Scriptural set of terms, your “Old Adam,” or sinful human nature, will take over your “New Adam,” or your Christ-nature? Ya sure, you-betcha! Paul would even write “*Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me,*” (Romans 7:20). Sin dwelling within us will drive us to ignore Christ's promptings in our lives causing us to set aside His Word and His will and causing us to say, think and do things contrary to His Word and His will.

But this isn't a late 1800's Gothic Novella...this is real life. More than that, this is real life in *Christ* and you therefore need to remember that you can, in fact, say "No" to sin and "Yes" to God! You can push away the "Mr. Hyde" and embrace and live through your "Dr. Jekyll" and you can do so every day! First, Paul's words at the end of this text are amazing and wonderful and furthermore absolute truth about the Christian existence. Paul writes: "*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ!*" (Romans 7:24,25). Make sure you're overtaken by that truth! Who will deliver me from this flip-flopping existence? We have victory over our sin and we have victory over our sin through Christ! In fact, we don't just have victory because we're forgiven when we sin, but we can and we do have victory over sin as we live day to day. You see, Paul also wrote one chapter earlier: "*But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.*" (Romans 6:17-18). Christ gives you victory over sin by forgiving you! But Christ also gives you victory over sin by empowering you to say "No!" to your sin, or your "Mr. Hyde", and "Yes!" to Him, or your "Dr. Jekyll"...and He does so through Christ's presence in your body every single day! Thank you, Jesus, for giving us victory! Thank you, Jesus, for giving us your presence! Amen?

Day Eighteen—Tuesday, March 14th
“I’m Blessed”
Psalm 32:1-5

There is an interesting phenomenon happening in our culture lately. As a theologian living in an increasingly secular society, the shift intrigues me greatly. You see, there seems to be an language shift and the shift, at least in part, is to using what I would call “Christian-ese” or the language of the Church, but the language of the church used in non-Church settings. For example, major (secular) corporations now have what they call a “Mission Statement.” A secular business with a “Mission Statement?” Those words are an integral part of who we are as a church and while I don’t know the entire history, I’m going to say the phrase in fact started in the Church with our “mission” to reach the lost. People are also more free about saying “God bless you” when you sneeze. I know we’ve used variations of that phrase over the years when someone sneezes, but when a person that I don’t even know, in a public place no less, says to me “God bless you!” when I sneeze...that’s truly amazing...and it happens all the time...my allergies are terrible by the way.

But there’s one that has recently cropped up that I’m truly intrigued with. People today, of all faiths and backgrounds, seemingly Christian, agnostics and atheists alike, are using the phrase “I’m blessed.” “Blessed” is definitely a Christian word, a Biblical word no less, but one that for the Christian is very special and very sacred. But people are using it nonetheless and using for all sorts of reasons and in all sorts of situations. Predominantly however, people use the phrase “I’m blessed” when referring to the material “blessings” brought their way in this world. They have received some tangible, physical “thing” and as a result, they proclaim without reservation, “I’m blessed!”

I bring all of that up because I’ve never heard someone exclaim “I’m blessed!” when they had something *taken away* from them! When things are rockin’ and rollin’ and the material “stuff” is flowing in and flowing freely, you’ll hear people admit “I’m blessed!” But when things go south and stuff is taken away, we are more inclined to think “I’m cursed” rather than “I’m blessed!”

Unless of course...you’re talking about what’s been taken away from us as believers in Jesus and why then, we are indeed, blessed! You see, David writes “Blessed is the man” or “Blessed is the one,” and explains that the “blessed status” that he’s proclaiming is brought about by transgressions forgiven; sins taken away; as well as,

no condemnation, no guilt, before God, whether in life or at death. David writes it this way: *“Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.”* (Psalm 32:1,2). Paul would echo these words as he wrote in Romans 8:1 *“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”* Because of Christ and His finished work at the cross and the grave, we are given His forgiveness and set free from the guilt of our sins. We are indeed, forgiven and free in Jesus and therefore we are also indeed...blessed!

In truth, for a person to be truly blessed and be able to proclaim “I’m blessed,” they need the blessed status that God alone can bring through forgiveness, mercy and freedom. Oh, don’t get me wrong, physical blessings are still blessings and physical blessings are absolutely from God’s hand. But what we need far more than houses and spouses; cars and careers; kids and cool stuff...is the grace and mercy and forgiveness of God Almighty found in Jesus and Jesus alone. As David writes it here and as we read elsewhere in the Bible, in and through Christ, your transgressions are forgiven, your sins are taken away and you stand guiltless in the sight of God! Thank you, Jesus, for forgiving us! Thank you, Jesus, for causing us to be blessed! Amen?

Day Nineteen—Wednesday, March 15th
“I’m Coming Clean”
Read Psalm 32:1-5 (again)

When we talk about telling the truth and getting difficult situations out in the open, we sometimes use the phrase “I’m coming clean.” We might say something like this, “I’ve done some bad things and I’m tired of the lies...now, I’m coming clean” or “I haven’t been completely truthful with you...now, I’m coming clean.” It really is a solid and vivid way of communicating a need for repentance, turning around, living differently, asking for forgiveness and yes, “coming clean!”

What’s interesting about this old phrase and its usage, is that in truth, you’re not actually “coming clean” at all! Oh, I understand that in fact you are saying that you’re “bringing it all out in the open”. I understand that “coming clean” is just another way of saying that all the dirty stuff will be aired and the bad behavior be brought to light and all will be allowed to be seen. So I get it. But in truth, when you say “I’m coming clean” you’re actually...coming dirty, coming filthy and coming soiled, right? When you come to someone and expose the problem you’ve created and shed light on the bad behavior you’ve been doing, or not doing as the case may be, you’re not “coming clean,” but you’re instead coming with your hands wide-open, but hands that are sullied and stained.

I mention all of this because when David wrote this beautiful Psalm about the love and mercy and forgiveness available to God’s People, he also wrote about finally “coming clean” with the Lord his God! David initially writes, *“For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer,”* (Psalm 32:4). This is a distinct reminder that when we fail to repent of our sin or yes, fail to “come clean” with the Lord, it can feel like there is a weight on our hearts and minds. And in truth, the Lord Himself can be the source of the weight as He seeks to bring us to the place of repentance so that He can in fact forgive us yet again.

But after David writes of the heavy weight of God’s hand, he lets us know that he did in fact, “come clean” with the Lord. He writes this about his admission of guilt to the Lord: *“I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin,”* (Psalm 32:5). Notice that David uncovers his iniquity and confesses his transgressions, and the Lord’s response is not to reject him but instead, to forgive him, or as he wrote it about the Lord, *“...you forgave the iniquity of my sin.”* The

Lord didn't send David off to fix himself up and get himself straight and with the expectation that he'd come back to Him completely clean. Neither did the Lord tell David he was too soiled, too dirty, too filthy for Him and His ability to forgive. No, God's response to David "coming clean" with Him, was to truly make him clean through His mercy and grace!

And of course, David's very personal words here remind us of the truth of our Lord's work in our own lives. We can't come to him clean! We can't! But when we come in humility and repentance, even though we come to the Lord with soiled hands, hearts and minds, He nonetheless takes us where we are and causes us to "be-come clean" in His sight. We may not "come clean," but when we repent of our sins and ask for forgiveness, He is ready with redemption and forgiveness and His cleansing power every time! Thank you, Jesus, for taking us dirty...but thank you, Jesus, more for making us clean! Amen?

Day Twenty—Thursday, March 16th
“That Dead Thing”
Ephesians 4:22-24

Here in our wonderful state of Iowa, we regularly encounter dead animals as we drive our streets and highways. One of the facts of life in a state with so many “critters,” is that you are simply going to encounter their carcasses as the byproduct of someone else’s bumper or possibly, sad to say, the byproduct of your own bumper too! We see all sorts of animals strewn about: deer, skunks, raccoons, squirrels, and even some birds. Just about anywhere you drive in our state - city streets or rural roads - you’ll come across an animal that has met a difficult demise in the traffic on the streets, and become, what we call, “road kill.”

Now, I know that some will kid about having “road kill stew” for dinner, but I’m fairly certain...in most cases...that’s a joke. But let’s go with it for a second: Can you even imagine coming up on a dead animal that’s been hit by a car and is therefore laying in the road and... stopping to pick it up for dinner? Let’s go all in on this: The carcass been there for a whole week, in the summer sun, when the humidity was 85% or better. The animal is bloated. The animal smells terrible. The parasites have taken over. The flies are everywhere. The birds are circling overhead. So...are you going to throw it in the back seat and serve it for dinner? Strap it to the roof and put it on the plate? No? You’re not? Well, of course you’re not! The stench of death and the repulsion you feel, just at my description of it, are certainly what would keep you from embracing that dead thing.

I bring all of it up because unfortunately, we in fact willingly embrace a “dead thing” and we do it all the time. The “dead thing” I’m talking about stinks to high heaven too. This “dead thing” is horribly offensive and seriously off-putting. It is something we encounter when we’re driving, but that’s because it’s something we carry around with us every day. The “dead thing” I’m referring to is, of course, our “old self” otherwise known as our sinful human nature. Remember, Paul reminds us in Ephesians chapter two that we were “*dead...in our trespasses and sins*” but that God, being rich in His mercy, “*made us alive with Christ!*” Amazing and wonderful words. But also words that remind us that the “dead” part of us, which sadly never leaves us till we leave this earth, is not what God wants us embracing or cherishing or holding on to at all.

The dead part of us may hang around after we come to faith in Jesus, but that dead part of us should be as repulsive to us as week

old road kill! Paul wrote this in our text for today: “...*put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness,*” (Ephesians 4:22-24). We are called to put off our old self...throw it down again and again, and do so daily!

In fact, we're called instead to pick up and embrace and live out the new self given to us in baptism and to do so every single day as well! We are called to live these verses as we come across people at work and at home and everywhere we go. Think of it in terms of what people will encounter when they come across you every day. Will they smell the stench of death on you...will they be repulsed by your behavior, your attitudes, your words? Will they be put off and seriously swerve to miss coming across you every day? Or...will the sweet fragrance of the love and joy and peace and patience of the Lord Jesus be what they encounter with you? Will they notice that you are different from others they come across? Will they notice that you are a child of God? Will they seek you out instead of seeking to avoid you? That's the aim. That's the goal. We are called to put on the “new self” and live in and through that “new self” every day.

When we “...*put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness...*”, people will truly see that Christ lives in us and that Christ living in you is different and better than all of the “dead things” they encounter every day! Thank you, Jesus, for making us alive! Thank you, Jesus, for giving us the “new self” as we live in this “old self” world! Amen?

Daily Devotion Questions

How would you explain this concept or Bible passage to someone else?

What amazes you by these words or this truth?

What questions does this concept or Bible passage raise?

What will you do differently as a result of the truth of this passage of the Bible?



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