

»» PAUL D. KOOISTRA ««



31 Days of Grace



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A Brick Wall: Testimony of God's Grace

A brick wall! If you've ever hit a brick wall emotionally, you know how it feels. That is where I was many years ago.

It was January of 1970. I can remember very well because at that particular point—spiritually and emotionally—I hit a wall. Up to that point I had been doing fairly well. I had been a Christian my entire life. I don't remember a time when I did not believe that Jesus Christ was who He said He was. So I had known the Lord a long time. Not only that, but I had the opportunity to grow up in a very fine church. I was active in Christian organizations in college. Not only that, I went to seminary, graduated, and was ordained.

Then I hit the wall. In 1970 I came to a place of doubting God—not doubting that He existed, or doubting that Jesus Christ was who He said He was; what I began to doubt was whether or not the Christian life was ever going to work for me. Up to that point, I had thought it had been working. Several people had disciplined me along the way. They taught me several techniques for “effectiveness” in the Christian life. I had been active in one Christian organization that taught us how to memorize Scripture and had gone through their entire system of memorization. Other people taught me how to get up early in the morning and have a devotional life, and I was doing all those things. I had been with another organization that taught us how to evangelize, how to go out in the streets and share our faith and use questionnaires to hook people.

I'd done all of that *and* I was a preacher, but Christianity didn't seem to be working for me.

I began to ask the question, “What's the problem?”

If you ask a question like that among your Christian friends, you will find that they have a lot of different answers for you. There will be no shortage of answers. Some people would tell me, “You just need to get up earlier.” “You just have got to pray longer.” “You just gotta pray more fervently.”

I remember one man who said, “Listen. I had a dry spell like that. It wasn't enough just to study the Scripture. I began to study the great hymns of the church and that helped me.”

I ran into another man who said, “I tell you, I have been where you are now. What you need is an experience.” He told me about this fantastic experience of God coming down to him in a white light. I won't go into the details about that, but I will tell you that his life seemed somewhat changed.

I knew that was not the answer. I knew that getting up and studying the Bible harder and praying harder was not the answer. I knew trying to chase after some experience was not the answer. I'd seen people who had gone down that road and it had worked for a while, but then it started to get old.

Then it just seemed as if the Holy Spirit began saying to me, "Paul, what you are looking for, you already have. What God gave you in the Lord Jesus Christ is what He wants to give you every day."

The Christian life is nothing more than grabbing hold of the gospel every day and finding that it is not only true, but it works. That's part of the truth of the gospel. The gospel is real, and it lives. The Holy Spirit takes what Christ did 2000 years ago and makes it as real today as it ever was.

He began to teach me that the Christian life is all of grace, because it is all of Christ. To progress in the Christian life is nothing more than to begin again in the gospel every day.

We never outgrow our need for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

– Paul Kooistra



Although I am less than the least of all God's people, the grace was given to me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.

– Ephesians 3:8



r. Kooistra, why is it that all you ever preach is grace?" The man at the chapel door was clearly displeased.

My answer was straightforward. "Because grace is all there is to preach."

I preach grace because I need grace.

I earned a ticket to hell, but I am going to heaven. I deserve death, but God gave me life. The Son of God voluntarily gave His life for me. That's grace.

God set His love on us before the foundation of the world.

He sent His Son to live a perfect life and pour out His blood on the cross.

He called us and adopted us as His own children. He is present with us by His Spirit.

He cleanses us, encourages us, and renews us every day.

He is preparing a home for us in the new heaven and new earth.

God's grace to sinners is the great overriding theme of Scripture.

We see His grace on every page of His Word—from Creation in Genesis to the invitation to the marriage supper of the Lamb and His spotless bride in Revelation. The Bible serves as a mirror, a two-edged sword, a piercing light into our inner lives, revealing our corruption and helplessness, pointing to our need for grace. Scripture shows us ourselves as we really are and points us to Jesus as He really is.

It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost. (1 Timothy 1:15 NASB)

Jesus said to them, ". . . For even the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45 KJV)

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day, according to the Scriptures. (1 Corinthians 15:3-4 NASB)

All we like sheep have gone astray; each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him. (Isaiah 53:6 NASB)

I preach grace because everyone around me needs grace: my family, my colleagues, even every driver of every one of the thousands of cars frustrating me in traffic, and especially the millions still in darkness around the world.

I preach grace because I need grace. Grace reminds me that I am a sinner. It rips my pride and magnifies the sin in my heart. It says to me, “You may think you are great because you have great responsibility, but you are nothing apart from Christ.”

God humbles me by grace. He reminds me that “all (my) righteousness is filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6b KJV). There is nothing I can do to make God love me more, but astonishingly there is nothing I can do to make Him love me less.

When God humbles me, I begin to see the magnitude of His love. He came all the way to earth, to a filthy stable, a low-income family in a two-bit small town, and an itinerant lifestyle, and suffered a criminal’s death for me.

Grace draws me again to the foot of the cross.

Read the passage of Scripture in each “READ, THINK, & PRAY” section, think through it carefully with application to your own life, and ask God to use it in guiding you to pray for yourself and others. Consider choosing at least one missionary to pray for during this time, asking God to apply the same truths in the missionary’s life that He is applying in yours.

You may want to pick up a small journal in which you can record your answers to the questions at the end of each lesson. You could also use it to write your own observations and prayers from each devotional and Scripture passage.



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Ephesians 1:3-14

1. *The missionary I will pray for along with myself is _____.*
2. *What do you face today that would look different if you approached it through the eyes of faith in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ?*
3. *Can you think of something in your life—a person or a situation—for which you need the grace of God to change you and your response to this person or event?*

To progress is always to begin again.

– Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*



And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose

– Romans 8:28



short time ago I picked up a book entitled *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff. . . And It's All Small Stuff*. I would prefer to let my motto be, “Don’t sweat the things under God’s control . . . and God’s got it all under control.”

There is no more rewarding, fulfilling life than that of God’s servants.

The immortal, majestic, sovereign, loving, and merciful God of the universe has everything under control. When I am His, my purpose is His glory. When I am His, I can know that He cares about even the most minuscule detail of my life.

“My times are in your hands” (Psalm 31:15). This has become a very practical reality in my life. At one point I learned to post my personal calendar in pencil, not pen. It was a good management tool, but it also served as a reminder of the attitude I need to have before God. I can plan ahead, but I can’t dictate tomorrow. Any expectations I have for my own future are subject to revision by Him. I have to remember that His plans are better than mine.

My late wife, Jan, was an exceptionally conscientious person. For a long time she worked as an RN in a nursing home. She lived out God’s love and compassion for those elderly people, but she had a hard time trusting Him with the details of her work. I began trying to help her learn to see the implications of the gospel, even in her desire to be an excellent nurse.

One autumn weekend we were hiking near a deserted campground beside the Mississippi River. We were enjoying the fall leaves and the isolation when we heard a rustle. There was an enormous raccoon foraging for food in an empty garbage can. “I guess that’s one disappointed coon,” I said. “With all the people gone there’s no garbage.”

Jan’s hand flew to her mouth. “Oh, no! I just remembered that I forgot to put out that last trash bag at work last night. Oh, well. God can take care of it.”

I had to laugh! God’s grace was seeping down into the cracks and crevices of our everyday lives. God loves us even when we forget the trash.

We were beginning to grasp what Jonathan Edwards meant when he said, “The secret of the Christian life is to allow the gospel to filter down into your life both rationally and experientially.”



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Psalm 103:6-14

1. *Can you think of an area of your life in which you have focused on your own resources, plans, or knowledge rather than believing God has redeemed this part of your life? How would it make a difference to look at your life from that perspective?*

2. *Have you recognized that your occupation is a calling from God redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ? How should that affect the work you do?*

3. *Pray that God will help you to see the beauty of all your life experiences— whether they are challenging, surprising, routine, easy, or difficult—because they are events that Christ has changed and redeemed by His great work on the cross.*

*To enrich me will not diminish thy fullness;
All thy lovingkindness is in thy Son,
I bring him to thee in the arms of faith,
I urge his saving name as the one who died for me,
I plead his blood to pay my debts of wrong,
Accept his worthiness for my unworthiness,
his sinlessness for my transgression,
his purity for my uncleanness,
his sincerity for my guile,
his truth for my deceits,
his meekness for my pride,
his constancy for my backslidings,
his love for my enmity,
his fullness for my emptiness,
his faithfulness for my treachery,
his obedience for my lawlessness,
his glory for my shame,
his devotedness for my waywardness,
his holy life for my unchaste ways,
his righteousness for my dead works,
his death for my life.
— The Valley of Vision*

Now we cannot . . . discover our failure to keep God's law except by trying our very hardest (and then failing) . . . it is not trying that is ever going to bring us home . . . All this trying leads up to the vital moment at which you turn to God and say, "You must do this. I can't."

— C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*



“And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.”

– John 17:5



e will never fully grasp the extent of the sacrifice God made in the gospel without understanding the immensity of the love-bond that existed within the Trinity—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—from all eternity.

When Jesus cried out on the cross, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46c), that was the greatest demonstration of love ever to take place. The Triune God willingly endured such cruel and violent separation for our sakes in the central event of all history, the cross. G.K. Chesterton called this the “furious love of God.” I believe that the hardest thing in the world for human beings to believe is that God loves us this much, enough to endure the break-up of the Trinity, in order that we could be reconciled to Him. “Love is not just an attribute of God,” wrote Jonathan Edwards. “It is the essence of God. God is love.”

The Christian life begins with the love of God. Throughout his writings the Apostle John was moved to refer to himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” Kittel’s Bible Dictionary comments that when John got to be an old man all he could write about was the “marvelous monotony of the love of God.” He was stuck on one theme, the 200-proof distillate of the love of God.

We all have a love-need that can only be met by the steadfast, unchangeable love of God. Our deepest emotional and spiritual needs are never met by material things, by prestige or power, exhilarating experiences, beauty, or human love. All of our human desires and longings are mere symptoms of our need for Him. Psalm 42:1 expresses this need: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.” He Himself is the Bread of Life and the Water of Life.

When we are gripped by the love of God, He frees us from being emotionally and spiritually crippled. When we realize how we are loved, then we can stop loving ourselves and start loving others. He enables us to become dispensers of love rather than consumers of love. We are able to love others, even our enemies. When old age, life-threatening illness, or danger threaten us, we can look with confidence to God’s loving promise of eternal life with Him.

When we sin, we come to Him for cleansing, comfort, and a new start. When we strike out, we come to Him. God loves us when we strike out. He covers the holes in our lives.

The love of God gives us purpose. The purpose for our lives grows out of His love. He liberates us from self-love. Our love relationship with God governs our

relationships with others. He enables us to begin to love unlovable sinners as He loves us. When we are angry, depressed, struggling, feeling insecure, we can bring these things to Him. He cares about every aspect of our lives. When our sins and fears are petty and downright embarrassing, we can come clean with Him. He is the Sinner's friend.

I believe He wants to see our lives, like John's, stuck on one theme: the unfailing and limitless love of God.



READ, THINK, & PRAY

1 John 4:1-12

1. As you examine your life, would you say it is more characterized by self-love, which grows out of your personal need to be loved, or redeemed love, which grows from a deepening understanding of God's love for you on the cross?

2. Consider one important or troubling relationship that you have. In what ways would you like to see the redeemed love of the gospel change this relationship?

Jesus did not come and hang out a help wanted sign. He came and hung out a help available sign.

– John Piper, *The Blinding Effects of Serving God*

The master magnet of the gospel is not fear, but love.

Penitents are drawn to Christ rather than driven.

– Charles Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Gold*

God's love is incomprehensible, unchangeable. It was not after we were reconciled to Him through the blood of His Son that He began to love us.

Rather, He has loved us before the world was created, that we also might be among His sons . . . He loved us even when He hated us.

This is the wonder of grace! He loved what He could not love.

– Augustine



So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

– *Colossians 2:6-7*



When I was eleven years old, my parents rented a plot of ground for a vegetable garden. My father gave me a small section to try my hand at farming. I planted my little patch with just one crop: gourds. I dug up a little dirt and stuck some seeds in the ground.

That summer back in the fifties was the best season for gourds Duluth, Minnesota, ever saw! The vines grew and flourished, the little gourds formed, matured, and multiplied. We had gourds decorating the house, gourd bookends, gourd birdhouses, gourds to sell, and gourds to give away. You-know-who became the expert farmer in the fifth grade. This was a snap!

My early agricultural success gave me the confidence to take up gardening again after Jan and I were married. Of course as an adult, I knew to take a more scientific approach. I read books, rented a tiller, used the right fertilizers and chemicals, planted only the best quality seeds, and watched for the harvest. This time half the seeds didn't come up. Then bugs began to eat what did come up. We had some weeks without rain; the ground cracked and plants shriveled. Then it rained too much; slugs and cutworms appeared. The birds and insects had a feast, but Jan and I didn't get much help with the grocery bills from that garden.

As a child I thought I had done it. God taught me better.

We see this so often in the Christian life, don't we? We appear to start well, maybe we have a nice spiritual growth spurt, and young fruit appears. People respond to our witness and benefit from our work. We get on track with a checklist: church attendance, Bible reading, systematic prayer, giving, witnessing, reading Christian books, attending small group meetings, service projects, you name it.

One day we wear out. "This is boring," we say. "It's stale. What happened to the joy? I'm tired." This great Christian adventure has become mechanical and impersonal. We have full calendars and empty souls.

We think we've been responsible for our own growth. We've tried to move ourselves along by our own steam. Here is where we need to step back and recognize that nothing good will ever happen without the work of the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit is at work, Jesus is real to us, our sin is magnified, and we are able to embrace the gospel.

The answer to our stagnation is not some mysterious, illusive formula. The answer is the gospel. I am a sinner. I come back to Jesus who died for me. Jesus is

not surprised by my sin. I do not need to be afraid to come, as if His grace were in short supply. He has forgiven me of all my sin, and that's good news. I will never be perfect in this life, but clothed in His righteousness I appear as perfect as Jesus does to God.

As Luther said, to progress is to begin again. We need to begin again *in the gospel*, to *always* be beginning again in the gospel. This alone is the “secret” to the Christian life.



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Psalm 116:12-19

1. What does “beginning again in the gospel” mean to you? Are there specific areas of your life in which you particularly need to apply this truth?
2. Pray that the Holy Spirit will enlighten your study of Scripture, enable you in your prayer life, and set you free to trust God in life's experiences.
3. Is there some thing or some area of your life that seems lacking the power and grace of God? Pray that the Holy Spirit will enable you to exercise faith in Christ in this area.

Life is not an aimless groping. We are called. “By his grace” means that God does not look around to see who will best suit his purposes and then single them out because he is pretty sure they will do a good job. It means that God has a capacity so large in love and purpose that he calls us in order to do something for us—to give us something. Grace.

– Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light*

Jesus loves me, this I know For the Bible tells me so. Little ones to Him belong. They are weak, but He is strong.

– Anna B. Warner



God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

– Luke 18:13c



S. Lewis said that we need to be reminded more often than instructed. This is true of the gospel.

God has single-handedly saved His people, and it seems to me that any other gospel wants to glorify man, wants to say that somehow man is involved in his salvation. There are many false “gospels,” but the true gospel is that God reached out to His people. He saved them because they could not save themselves.

Galatians 4:4 (KJV) tells us that God sent Jesus into the world in “the fullness of time.” God planned this time for His coming, the pivotal point of all history, for many reasons. One of those reasons was the prominence of the Pharisees. Never in all of history has there been a better foil to the true gospel. They represent the best that human life has ever produced. The Pharisees constantly gave Jesus a platform to proclaim the truth as He exposed their lies and contrasted their counterfeit morality with His perfection. The gospel writers use the Pharisees as a reflection of our own ludicrous delusion that we can make ourselves good enough for God.

Most of us acknowledge that we have some sin in our lives, but we convince ourselves that we have more good than bad and that somehow the good is going to outweigh the bad. It wouldn't make any difference. The “good” is as bad as the bad. Isn't that what the Pharisees teach us? Their “goodness” was self-righteousness. That's where we see the lost condition of man. We don't see it in the gutter. That is the result of being lost. We don't see it in the prostitutes and drug dealers. That is the result. Instead we see it in the foolish assumption that I can be good enough to stand before God, to look Him in the eye, to come to His level. I think that's the whole point of the Tower of Babel. Early in the Bible men thought they could build a platform up to the level of God. Wasn't the temptation of the Garden of Eden really the same thing? “If you eat of the tree, you'll be like God. You won't need God because you'll be like God.”

The whole human race is trying to impress God. That's our sin. We are all Pharisees. Our “goodness” is our lostness. When we look at the Pharisees, we realize that pride is really the root of our sin. As we begin to share the gospel with others, we need to be able to explain to them, “Your ‘goodness’ will send you to hell.”

Jesus said, “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matthew 9:13). The Pharisees teach me that I am not righteous in myself. My own manufactured, self-made “goodness” is repulsive in God's sight. I am a sinner, and Jesus died for

sinner. Jesus calls me to repentance. His death is applied to me. My sin nailed Him to the cross. If you are a fellow believer, yours did, too.

Luther said, “We are all beggars.” We need to learn to beg. We need to pray that God would grant us a fresh awareness of our need for the gospel, that He would allow us to be beginning again in the gospel, coming continuously like little children in need of His love and grace.



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Luke 18:10-14

1. What “goodness” in yourself gives you pleasure?
2. Do you recognize in your life any desire to impress God and then others with your own personal righteousness?
3. Pray that God will sanctify your desire and your effort for holiness with a Christ-centered humility and dependence.

Listening to scripture in the form of story we learn that we are also in the story, traveling toward God, being drawn toward him. We develop a sense of journeying and discipleship. If we fail to develop this “story sense” we inevitably start “applying” the Bible—taking charge of a verse or a doctrine or moral with which we intend to fix some fragment of ourselves. This is an excellent recipe for creating good Pharisees (who were great readers of scripture, but notoriously poor listeners to God).

– Eugene Peterson, *Traveling Light*

Faith is the acknowledgment of the entire absence of all goodness in us, and the recognition of the cross as the substitute for all the want on our part. The whole work is His, not ours, from first to last.

– Horatius Bonar, *The Everlasting Righteousness*

Over time the spirit of law-keeping stiffens into extremism. I know of no legalism that does not enlarge its domain of intolerance.

– Phillip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*



For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

– John 3:16



he gospel teaches us that God loves you as much as He loves His own Son, Jesus. Doesn't that sound a bit blasphemous? How could that be true?

I am convinced that God's love for His people is a foundational concept, along with God's sovereignty and His holiness, in all of Christian teaching. The infinite, eternal, unchangeable Creator of the universe loves us.

The Father loved us so much that He gave His Son to die in our place.

In fact, because the perfect record of Jesus is transferred to us and because His death supplied full satisfaction for our sins, God the Father actually says He loves us as much as He loves His true Son. The whole Old Testament is really about a God who reaches out to His people. They are His people for only one reason—because He loves them.

“The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers . . .” (Deuteronomy 7:7-8a).

In Ephesians 1, Paul tells us that when we have believed in Christ we are adopted into His family, we have an inheritance in Him and the seal of the Holy Spirit of promise. *The Shorter Catechism* says that, “Adoption is an act of God's free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of the sons of God.”

Adoption is a phenomenal thing, and God gave Jan and me firsthand experience with that reality. Back in 1968, before the evil days of abortion, we were longing for a baby, and God had not sent us one in the usual way. Finally we decided to apply for adoption. After a nerve-racking delay, we were approved and brought home our beautiful new son.

Smitten from the beginning, we couldn't have loved him more if he had been our biological child. However, after a year the law required us to hire an attorney and appear before a judge in order to secure the adoption. When we met with the lawyer he advised us on one very important thing.

He said, “There is one question the judge is sure to ask, and that is, ‘Why do you want to adopt this child?’ Don't say, ‘We didn't have any children and we wanted one.’ Don't say, ‘We have a five-bedroom house, and we want to fill all the rooms.’ Simply say, ‘We want to adopt this child, because we love this child.’” Of course, it was true that we loved that child, and that is the answer we gave.

Once that adoption became legal, it was irrevocable. Paul, Jr. had “all the rights and privileges of a son.” This boy whom we loved so much was our child, not anyone else’s. He was as much ours as his two sisters who were born to us later. There was not one thing he could ever do to unadopt himself. Our home was his home; our address was his address. He had a claim on our hearts that other people’s children didn’t have.

We had responsibilities for him before God and before the law that we didn’t have for children in another family. The anchor of that relationship, which continues until this day, is love.

Family love, the love of the Father and the Son, is the foundation of the Christian’s assurance that He will never let us go.



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Ephesians 3:14-19

1. *What does your adoption mean to you?*
2. *Your adoption is also a legal matter. How does the fact that God has made you “legally” a part of His family through the sacrifice of His true Son change the way you look at yourself or the events of this day?*
3. *Have you experienced any losses, maybe through death, divorce, or some other means? How does the fact that God will never let you go affect your life today?*
4. *The world says self-worth is a byproduct of personal success; consider how different self-worth is when it is built up in our permanent relationship with God.*
5. *Consider how much it cost God on the cross to adopt you.*

The best name by which we can think of God is Father. It is a loving, deep, sweet, heart-touching name, for the name of father is in its nature full of inborn sweetness and comfort. Therefore also we must confess ourselves children of God, for by this name we deeply touch our God, since there is not a sweeter sound to the father than the voice of the child.

– Martin Luther

All those that are justified, God vouchsafeth, in and for His only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption: by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God; have His name put upon them, receive the Spirit of adoption; have access to the throne of grace with boldness; are enabled to cry, Abba, Father; are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by Him, as by a father; yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption, and inherit the promises, as heirs of everlasting salvation . . .

– Westminster Confession of Faith



We love Him, because He first loved us.

– 1 John 4:19



ast forward twenty-seven years. In 1997, Paul, Jr. was a graduate student at the University of Mississippi, and his mother and I had recently moved to Atlanta.

One Friday afternoon we were heading out the door for a picnic when the phone rang.

“Hey, Dad! Can you do me a big favor?”

Paul was calling from the Memphis airport, preparing to fly to Canada to serve as best man in a friend’s wedding. He had learned somewhat late that he would need his birth certificate in order to board a connecting international flight out of Atlanta in just a couple of hours. Did we have the birth certificate? Could we possibly rendezvous at the Atlanta airport during his layover?

Ever-efficient, Jan dashed to the file cabinet and promptly scooped up a file folder with Paul’s vital records, including the birth certificate. Picnic plans dropped, speed limits pushed, we reached the airport with time to spare. One look at Paul’s face made the small inconvenience more than worth it. “Thanks, Dad! Thanks, Mom!”

He kept repeating himself, “I just want to thank you. I just want to thank you.” His eyes fell on the manila folder in my lap. We all knew that inside that folder were the adoption papers we had signed when Paul became our son back in 1970.

Finally I turned to him and said, “Son, let me thank you, because one of the greatest privileges that I have had in my entire life is to have you for a son. God allowed me to adopt you.”

Twenty-seven years, about a million diapers, dozens of sleepless nights, scrapes and bruises and crayon marks on the wall; seasons of discipline and disappointment, all bathed in prayer and saturated in love.

We had given a squirming, helpless infant our name, a place in our home, our time, our money, our energy, our identity, pouring our very lives into his. Most of all, we had loved him. Now a healthy, wholesome, responsible young man, a man who had been given a new heart by God, sat smiling at us in the airport.

I loved that kid! All I could think about was how I loved that kid.

Reflecting later, I realized that God had given me a tiny, key-hole-sized glimpse into His own heart. Here was a fragment of insight into the greatness of His love

for us and the delight He takes in His chosen children. Where my love is limited, imperfect, flawed by sin, His is infinite and perfect, passionate and pure. Our love for Him wells up in our hearts, but it is generated by His love for us.

God's love is important in our lives, and God's love is the great motivation for evangelism. Recently I visited San Ye, the idol capital of Taiwan. The little church there was struggling. They had only about thirty people, and I was able to talk in depth with several of them. I asked them each to tell me how they became Christians. They all had the same answer. It wasn't through apologetics, it wasn't through arguments or high-powered programs. Each one said, "It was because I saw the love of God in a missionary."

We need to thank God for that love and to pray that this needy world will see His love in us.



READ, THINK, & PRAY

1 John 4:15-21

1. *With which character in this very personal story did you identify? What truth do you see about God or yourself in that character?*
2. *Put yourself in the shoes of the other character. Now what do you see about God or yourself?*

*Good News! News so good that we
should never have imagined it.
News that would stagger us if we were
able to hear it for the first time as a
message that everything about God is
so completely different from what we
thought or feared. News that he has sent
his Son to us and is inviting us to share
in an unspeakable joy. The ultimate
secret of this story is this: that there is
a homecoming for us all because there
is a home.*

– Helmut Theilicke, *The Waiting Father (About the parable of the Prodigal Son)*

*O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as others see us!
It wad frae monie a blunder
free us An' foolish notion:
What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us,
And ev'n devotion!*

– Robert Burns, *To a Louse*



This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.

– 1 Corinthians 11:24



One of the greatest blessings of the Christian life is that the Holy Spirit takes what Jesus Christ did 2000 years ago and makes it as real today as it ever was. I am convinced that is why Jesus gave us the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

He said, “Do this in remembrance of Me.”

When? When you first became a believer? Certainly, but also time and time again.

Today people are very particular about what they eat. We know that in many ways what we eat is what we are. Christ gave us this meal to celebrate in worship, but in a sense we are to “eat” it every day. That is, I am to contemplate His sacrifice for me on the cross and remind myself on a daily basis that His blood is active in my life. His body was ripped apart for me, His blood gushed out for me, and that’s who I am. That alone is the “secret” of the Christian life. We don’t have to run around looking for “something more” or a higher level of spirituality or anything like that. We need to realize that “what is more” is what we already have.

Too many times we tend to forget that most basic thing and try to “get ahead” to something more advanced or complicated. The Pharisees did it with rules and applications of the law; the monastics did it with poverty. We modern evangelicals do it in a multitude of ways: attending conferences, memorizing verses, learning theology, reading Christian books, witnessing door to door, wearing ourselves out in Christian service. The list could go on and on.

We have a natural tendency to try to conjure up worth in God’s sight, to try to run on our own steam, to try to live the Christian life in our own strength. It’s impossible. You wear yourself out.

Over and over we have to come back to Jesus. He is our Bread of Life.

We can’t feed on our methods, our activities, our knowledge of the Scripture, our record of service, or the esteem of our peers. We can’t feed on our joys or successes. Psalm 62:10 tells us, “though your riches increase, do not set your heart on them.” That’s difficult. When things are going well, we smile and relax. We enjoy being comfortable. We must recognize that, even on the best day of our lives, especially on the best day of our life, we aren’t good enough for Him.

When the great astronomer Copernicus was dying, someone hoping to encourage him about his own success placed a copy of his brilliant work, *The Revolution of the Heavenly Bodies*, in his hands. At that point Copernicus directed that his

epitaph should read, “O Lord, the faith Thou dost give to Saint Paul, I cannot ask; the mercy Thou didst show to Saint Peter, I dare not ask; but, Lord, the grace Thou didst show to the dying thief, that, Lord, show to me.”

We are all the dying thief. Consequently, we can't feed on our failures and disappointments, either. Even on the worst day of our lives, we can't surprise Him by our foolishness or out-sin His grace. When pain comes in life and especially in ministry, we need to bring it to the foot of the cross for cleansing and comfort. Psalm 61 says, “Hear my cry, O God; listen to my prayer. From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I.”

Jesus is that Rock.



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Psalm 61

1. *In what areas of your life do you need to be called back to Christ and the gospel?*
2. *What does this truth mean to you in the celebration of Communion?*
3. *Consider this! There is nothing you can do today that would cause God to love you less.*
4. *What does it mean to you that Christ encourages us spiritually to feed on His broken body and His shed blood?*
5. *What does the dying thief on the cross, who is redeemed, teach you about your own life?*

*None other lamb, none other Name,
None other hope in heaven or earth or sea,
None other Hiding place from guilt and shame,
None, besides Thee.*

– Christina Rossetti

Lament

Weep, weep for those Who do the work of the Lord With a high look And a proud heart. Their voice is lifted up In the streets, and their cry is heard. The bruised reed they break By their great strength, and the smoking flax They trample. Weep not for the quenched (For their God will hear their cry And the Lord will come to save them) But weep, weep for the quenchers . . .

Weep, weep for those Who have made a desert In the name of the Lord.

– Evangeline Paterson, *Deep Is the Rock*



But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ, and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

– *Philippians 3:7-9*



during the years our family spent in St. Louis, we became big fans of the St. Louis Cardinals. Often we attended games on the passes the team gave out to ministers. The truth is that the seats weren't very desirable. They were so high in the stadium that we couldn't see which team was at bat without binoculars. My wife and I got some good exercise with the climb; we enjoyed the crowds, the music, and the peanuts, but usually got more pleasure out of the free date than from the game.

Then one day we were invited to attend a game with the president of the Rawlings Corporation, the manufacturers of the balls and gloves. Believe me, that was a whole different ballgame. As the valets came running out to park his big luxury car, he handed me a ball and said, "Here's your souvenir. You won't get one in there."

Someone ushered us to plush box seats three rows behind the dugout. We had just begun to enjoy the game when, lo and behold, Ozzie Smith hit a pop foul and my wife started pounding on my leg. "Get up! It's going to hit you!" The ball passed right through my hands. Kids were scrambling everywhere, but I got that ball. It was mine! I was as happy as any little kid.

That was a game I'll always remember. It was entirely different from other games. It was different because of "who I was with."

On our own before God we wouldn't get the good seats. In fact, we wouldn't even get into the game. With His Son we can come into His very presence, but the only reason He views us differently is because of "who we are with." He has "blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3). We were chosen in love, predestined to adoption as sons, given redemption through His blood, forgiveness of sins, an inheritance in Him, and the seal of the Holy Spirit. All these blessings are ours because of Christ. Notice that there is not one thing here that we can produce for ourselves.

Nine times in Ephesians 1 Paul mentions that we are "in Christ." It actually means "inside Christ." "In Christ." That is our justification. We have a legal pardon, causing God to view us as if we had never sinned. I like to say that "in Christ" is the Christian's true address. Heaven is our true home, and God's people

in every age and every place are our true family. Jesus gives us our true identity. Missionaries know a lot about changes of address and locales, about saying “goodbye” and being separated from loved ones, about culture shock, feeling out of place, being overworked, misunderstood. They need a constant awareness of their security in Christ, of their true identity and value in Him. You and I need that, too, but missionaries need it especially. Pray for them, won’t you?



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Philippians 3:20-21

1. *This world has many insecurities. Which ones are you dealing with at the present? What new security does your permanent position “in Christ” create as you face these threats?*

2. *If life were a baseball game, then it would be God’s game. The stadium, the players, and even the rules belong to Him. You are His guest at the ball park. How can you experience His presence in your life today?*

Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

– Psalm 73:25

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

– John Newton

There are . . . few stronger indications of ignorance of the power and evil of sin than the confident assertion of our ability to resist and subdue it.

– Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to Romans*



In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple . . . Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; The whole earth is full of his glory . . . "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."

- *Isaiah 6:1, 3b, 5*



ohn Calvin says that to come to the gospel there are only two things you need to know. You need to know who God is and you need to know who you are.

One modern philosopher put it this way: "There is only one God and you are not Him."

It doesn't matter where you begin. If you begin with God and understand that He is eternal, holy, righteous, and perfect, you will understand your own great need, your own sin. On the other hand, if you understand what a sinner you are, you will cry out for the righteousness and holiness of God. You begin to recognize that you have absolutely no hope for salvation apart from His grace.

Here is the point in our response to God's love that I call surrender. By "surrender," I do not mean a formula. I mean coming to the place that we agree with God that what He says about us is true.

First of all, He says that we are created in His image. We have been made in the very image of the eternal God. Then the Bible says very clearly that we are fallen. While we have not altogether lost that image, we are fallen and imperfect in every aspect of our lives. This means that in no way can we produce righteousness. There is no way we can produce holiness in ourselves. Further, the Bible teaches us that because we are fallen creatures, we have an innate tendency to try to take God's place. The temptation in the garden was, "Eat of the fruit of the tree, and you will be like God. You will know what He knows." Therefore, you will no longer need God. You will be able to take His place in your life.

We have inherited this attitude from our first parents. We are not only fallen, we are usurpers, and we need to claim what He gives us in the Lord Jesus Christ. We don't like to admit this about ourselves, but God has a habit of reminding us. Shortly before my younger daughter was married, she had a minor accident on the interstate. Believe it or not, only by God's mercy, I kept my cool.

To everyone's amazement, I didn't get angry or even very upset. Then only a couple of days later the entire family saw me erupt like a small volcano over a

lost receipt. (After all, if I'd had that receipt I could have gotten a free flashlight!) There it was, my sinful putrid heart spewing out before God and everybody. No cover-up, just dirt. I had to go to God and the family and again I had to "begin again in the gospel" over a cheap flashlight that I didn't even really need.

I don't like to admit that kind of thing about myself, but it's true. Surrender is nothing more than coming to the point of agreement with God about what He says about you. You are a fallen usurper, one who is self-centered in every way, and the only answer is the gospel. The cross of Jesus Christ is all that we have. It is the only thing that we have, because it is the only thing that can take a lover of self like me and even in a small way begin to make me into a lover of God.

It's a daily thing, starting over again with total need, total dependence every time. It's remembering that "I am not Him." God never grows weary of our coming again. His love and His grace never change, and His mercies are new every morning.



READ, THINK, & PRAY

1 John 1:5-10

1. *What socially acceptable sins do you tolerate in your life, sins that you need to surrender to God and admit they are hateful to Him?*
2. *Pray that God, by His grace, would lead you to agreement with Him about the depth of your sin.*
3. *Ask God to reveal sin in your life that you are not even aware of.*
4. *Ask God to give you the motivation and the ability to put away the sin that offends Him.*

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!*

– John Newton

Nothing dies harder than the desire to think well of oneself.

– T.S. Eliot, "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca"

When you think about it, virtually every failure in our Christian lives can be traced back to failure here: We forget who God is; or we forget who we are.

– Sinclair Ferguson



Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.

– John 17:17



God in His great mercy has given us His Word, the Bible, to teach us His ways. He gives us the “unsearchable riches of Christ,” and we can never exhaust the wonders He gives us in the Scriptures. His Holy Spirit teaches us through His Word. He blesses us and amazes us at the power the Scriptures have in our lives.

Sometimes even the smallest word grabs us and impacts us and even changes us. We know that the Word is powerful, because it comes from God and that it has impact only when the Holy Spirit applies it in our lives.

The Bible is a two-edged sword, a piercing searchlight into our inner lives, revealing our helplessness and corruption, our tremendous need for grace. I am convinced that there is really only one message in the Bible and that message is the message of grace. Scripture shows us who we really are and points us to Jesus as He really is.

In the Bible God often uses the lives of great characters—Abraham, Moses, David, and others—to teach us about Himself. In fact, one of the ways we can know that the Bible is true is that it refuses to whitewash over the sins of the saints. The Bible is realistic. It gives us honest accounts of God and His dealings with men. If any of the famous Sunday school heroes were among us today, they would be quick to say, “Don’t look at me. Look at my God. He can teach you about Himself through me.”

You might consider the Bible a never-ending spiritual treasure house, full of precious gems and surprises around every twist and curve. No matter how deeply you delve, there is more to learn; no matter how much delight it gives the Christian, there are fresh discoveries and pleasures the more closely we look. On every page the true jewel that stands out above and illumines all the others is Jesus, the lover of sinners. When I preach I must bear in mind that essentially the only thing the Bible teaches is the gospel of grace. The Bible is flat. There are not hills and valleys. That one central message of grace permeates every chapter of God’s Word.

You and I can get help from the Bible for many things—how to rear a family, how to conduct business, and other things—but the great thread binding all its pages together is the thread of grace, the “truth from of old” that never grows old. God loved us from all eternity. “Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the scrip-

tures” (1 Corinthians 15:3b-4). When God begins to work that message into our lives, we can’t get enough of it.

Luther gave all the credit for the Reformation to the influence of the Word of God. He said, “It was the preaching of the Word, not political power or the sword that established the Reformation in Germany. I simply taught, preached, wrote God’s Word. Otherwise, I did nothing. And when I ate, slept, or drank beer with my friends Phillip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince nor an emperor inflicted such damage upon it. I did nothing. The Word did it all.”



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Luke 24:13-27

1. *How did being personally caught up in the story affect the two men listening to Jesus?*
2. *When you read the Bible, how can you focus more exclusively on the person and work of Christ?*
3. *If the Scriptures are primarily a story about God and His saving work in Christ, what are some defective ways we approach Bible study?*
4. *What did you learn about Christ and yourself in the passage today?*

Modern Christians have wrongly attempted to handle the Bible as if it were an encyclopedia of religious thought. We tend to have a “where can I find a verse on . . .” approach to Scripture.

This approach robs the Bible of its vitality, its genius. The Bible is not put together like an encyclopedia, organized by topic. The Bible is a storybook. It is God’s story, the story of His character, His redemption of this fallen world, and His sovereign plan for the ages . . .

– Paul Tripp, *An Age of Opportunity: A Biblical Guide to Parenting Teens*

You would not understand what the Bible has to say if you separated out all of the verses on marriage, government, sex, parenting, communication, work, money, the church, etc. Whatever you would learn from these verses would be distorted and out of context because they would be understood separate from what the Bible is really all about . . .

– Paul Tripp



But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

– Genesis 32:26b



When my grandmother was a young woman she had an accident which destroyed her hip, and the rest of her life she needed a crutch in order to walk. We kids had a great time playing with that old crutch. One day she got a new aluminum crutch. We said, "Man, this looks like the Olympics!" and we pole-vaulted over the sofa.

Grandma didn't like that a bit, and she put the crutch away. Of course, that created problems for her, because she couldn't walk without the crutch.

You may remember that Jacob had trouble walking, too. We see him as the great example of a sinner saved by grace. His very name means usurper, cheater, supplanter, heel-grabber. God changed him into Israel, prince with God. Genesis 25 tells us how, even before he was conceived, his father, Isaac, prayed that God would open Rebekah's womb. God answered by sending twins. Before Jacob and his older twin, Esau, were born, God revealed that the older would serve the younger. All along that was God's intention.

How does Jacob respond to the promise of blessing? You know the story.

Even though God has already promised him favor, he goes after it with his own ingenuity. He tricks Esau into selling him his birthright and later, with his mother's help, he deceives Isaac into granting him the blessing. He flees for his life to Paddam Aram, marries two sisters who, with their handmaids, give birth to a dozen sons. He becomes a rich man, but again his devious ways get him into trouble, and he returns to Canaan to escape conflict with his irate father-in-law. All his life he has taken the timing of the blessing into his own hands. He has attempted to take God's place in his life.

At this point the Bible tells us that he was "left alone" beside the Jabbok River. Jacob was forced to confront his own spiritual emptiness. This was a self-made man, a man who thought he could take care of himself, and at last he had to come to the point of recognizing his own spiritual bankruptcy. He had to come to the place where he believed that there was nothing good in himself, there was nothing righteous in himself, there was nothing he could bring and place before God.

Now in Genesis 32, he meets God and wrestles with Him. "When the man [God] saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip, so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man."

What does it mean that God could not overpower Jacob? God could have vaporized Jacob! It means that God does not violate the human will.

God never violates the human will. He changes that will so that when we respond to the electing love of God it is a real response. There is nothing mechanical about it, because God has changed my will making me want to respond to Him. God will not smash the human will. He will not destroy the human will.

When God touched Jacob's hip, he immediately prevented him from walking. He needed something or someone to lean on, and God was saying, "Listen, Jacob. You'd better lean on Me." All the long years of Jacob's life he walked with a limp to remind him of his dependence on God. That limp was a gift!

When I was in college I used to get mad every time I heard someone say, "Oh, you Christians! You can't make it on your own. You're just looking for a crutch."

If I could see those people today, I'd say, "You're absolutely right. I can't make it on my own. I need more than a crutch. I need Christ. You may not realize it yet, but you need Him, too."



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Isaiah 43:1-18

1. *What afflictions in your life have forced you to lean on God? How do these afflictions demonstrate God's grace to you?*
2. *In what way has God taught you to let go of your own strength and to rely on Him to bring His will about in your life?*
3. *Is there anything you want very much and for which God may be asking you to wait for His perfect timing?*
4. *Pray for God's will in your life today. His "yeses" and His "nos" are better than our plans or desires.*

*Be much at prayer; it is the beggar trade
By which true Christians are the richest made*
- Anonymous

It is useless to say you know not how to pray. Prayer is the simplest act in all religion. It is simply speaking to God. It needs neither learning nor wisdom nor book knowledge to begin it. It needs nothing but heart and will. The weakest infant can cry when he is hungry. The poorest beggar can hold out his hand for alms, and does not wait to find fine words. The most ignorant man will find something to say to God, if he has only a mind.

- J.C. Ryle, *Prayer*



By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

– Hebrews 11:8



od reveals that His love is the foundation of His grace. What response should we have to that love? Hebrews 11 tells us that faith is the biblical response. “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1). Without faith we cannot know God, we cannot worship Him, we cannot please Him. This great faith chapter highlights the story of Abraham, the father of the faith, and gives quick overviews of numerous other Old Testament believers whose faith is of the same substance as Abraham’s. Abraham is the father of the faith, and God uses him to teach us to respond to grace by faith.

Abraham was willing to step outside his own comfort zone. He obeyed God by leaving Ur of the Chaldees, possibly the most sophisticated city in the entire world at that time, “even though he did not know where he was going” (Hebrews 11:8b). He left not only comfort, but the pinnacle of civilization of his day. He went to live not merely in a tent, but to a place “where he didn’t know where he was going.” How could he do that? “He was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10).

He had a view of eternity, of heaven. Because he had a view of heaven, he could let go of the comfortable environment and go to another culture.

He didn’t flinch at the shock of being wrenched away from everything familiar. Abraham is the quintessential example of leaving home, friends, luxury, and security in obedience to God, but we need to realize that what he gave up and what we may give up are nothing in comparison to what Jesus gave up for us.

The great missionary Helen Roseveare made this comment about her commitment to go to Africa: “God only asked me to give up twenty years of my life. He gave up His very life on the cross for me. He only asked me to go from England to the Congo. He came from heaven to earth for me. He came from deity to humanity. He came from perfection to sin for me.”

Why was Helen Roseveare willing to go? It was not out of desire for adventure or cross-cultural involvement. It was not altruism or self-justification. It was her response of faith in the One who gave up everything for her.



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Hebrews 11:8-10

1. *Do you have any sense that you may be living in a rut simply because it is comfortable?*
2. *In your witness of Christ, is there any place God may ask—or is asking—you to move beyond your comfort zone?*
3. *In your giving to advance the cause of Christ, how much more would you have to give to move you beyond your comfort zone?*
4. *Abraham had a loose grip on the things of this world, and a strong grip on eternity and the things of God. Pray for a faith response like Abraham had.*

Abraham and Sarah reveal that it is the grace of God which enables a person or people to be involved in mission. No one is righteous enough to deserve God's call; no one is good enough to have the privilege of participating in the mission of God. The call of God is a gift of His grace.

– David W. Shenk, *God's Call to Mission*

True faith has nothing whatever of merit about it, and in the highest sense cannot be called a 'work.' It is but laying hold of a Savior's hand, leaning on a husband's arm, and receiving a physician's medicine. It brings with it nothing to Christ but a sinful man's soul. It gives nothing, contributes nothing, pays nothing, performs nothing. It only receives, takes, accepts, grasps, and embraces the glorious gift of justification which Christ bestows, and by renewed daily acts enjoys that gift.

– J.C. Ryle, *Old Paths*

The just shall live by faith—not just be justified by faith: the just shall live by faith.

– Francis Schaeffer, *True Spirituality*



[Abraham] did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.

– Romans 4:20-21



he Christian life is impossible. It's not just hard. It's impossible. That's why it has to be of God.

Not one of us can create faith and salvation in ourselves. The closest thing you will ever see to a miracle is your own salvation.

Abraham expected the impossible. Look at Hebrews 11 again. He was able to believe the impossible because he wasn't blinded by the temporal. He wasn't so bogged down in everyday life that he couldn't see that God had His hand on his life. Most of life is routine, just unfolding as it did the day before, but God is doing something in our lives. Even when we don't see the evidence, He is at work.

God was going to bless the world through Abraham's seed, but no child came along. Abraham decided to take things into his own hands. Even this man of faith was weak. God is strong, but we are never strong. Abraham tried to create what God had promised with the slave woman, but that wasn't part of God's plan.

God was waiting so that when this child came along neither Abraham nor Sarah could say, "I did it." It was biologically impossible. They were dried up. God wanted us all to see that the promise, the promise of grace, the salvation that God works in our lives, is something we cannot create in ourselves. It is a gift. Yet, more often than not, we try to move things along in our own strength. We think, "If this gets done, it's because of me." I believe that my plan is God's plan. Why do we do that? It is because we get blinded by the temporal. We become so fixed on the small things, our own little goals and responsibilities, that we forget that only God can bring things into being.

We need to consider this in our daily lives when we have a problem, when we have an impasse, when there are barriers we can't get through. Maybe it is time to step back and do some business with God. Remember that it isn't your responsibility to break through. Sometimes you are looking for guidance, wishing that God would shout down some instructions from heaven, and no clear leading comes. Then you trust Him to lead you as you put one foot in front of the other day by day, using the wisdom and knowledge that He gives you for that day.

We need to stop and say, "God, my life does not belong to me. It belongs to You. If anything good happens, it's going to happen because of what You've done. I want You to lead me, even though I don't know how You're going to do that. You do what You want to in my life."

Some things will be more difficult and perplexing than we could ever imagine. We don't pray for problems or for burdens, but we know that God will use them when they come.

Do we want what God wants in our lives more than what we want? Abraham came to believe that God would do what He said, even when it was impossible.



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Hebrews 11:9-13

1. *What mundane and routine things that you face today can you place in His hands and enjoy more fully in His providence?*
2. *Every one of us faces things that are bigger than we are. Pray for faith to trust God's perfect will for your life.*

*Faith is to believe what we do not see, and the reward
of this faith is to see what we believe.*

– Augustine

*It is not the strength of our faith that saves, but the truth of our faith—
not the weakness of our faith that condemns, but the lack of faith in the One who died.*

– John Rogers, *The Doctrine of Faith*

*Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

– John Newton

Attempt something so great for God that it is doomed to failure unless God be in it.

– John Haggai, *365 Things Every Successful Leader Should Know*



By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son

– Hebrews 11:17



Another aspect of faith that Abraham teaches us is that we have to be willing to give up everything. He was able to do it, because he knew God; he was the friend of God. He was about to sacrifice Isaac even though God had said to him, “It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned” (Genesis 21:12). This man had seen God prove that He is able to keep His promise.

Think about Abraham’s life. He waits, he waits, he even finagles, he waits some more, and then it happens. Can you imagine the joy those two old people felt holding a newborn baby in their arms? Can you imagine the shot in the arm of faith that was to Abraham? He believes God. Now the doubts are washed away. God seems so close. Then one day God shows up and says, “Take your son . . . and go to the region of Moriah.” Sacrifice “your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love” (Genesis 22:2).

Why doesn’t Abraham at least ask a question? “God, did I hear that right?” No, he goes immediately to do it. Why? He has a relationship with God. He knows God. “Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead” (Hebrews 11:19).

He knew God would make it right even though he didn’t know how. We know that God gave Isaac back to Abraham as a “shadow and type” of His own beloved Son who would go all the way to actual death and would literally be raised from the dead for us.

God calls us to be willing to sacrifice everything for Him, also. He doesn’t ask us to kill our children as He asked Abraham or as He Himself voluntarily did for us. He calls us to be “living sacrifices,” as Paul describes in Romans 12: “. . . I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.” Paul goes on in that chapter to describe what a life lived by the grace of God looks like. It is a rich chapter, worthy of study, meditation, and memorization, one of those gems of Scripture that sends us back over and over to our dependence on God.

William Borden was a man who made such a sacrifice. As a student at Yale University in the early 1900s, he inherited a million dollars from his wealthy father. That probably would be about thirty million in today’s economy. Each weekend he left the campus in order to spend time in the Bowery in New York City ministering to alcoholics and the down-and-out, putting his arms around them, pulling them out of their filth, sharing the love of Jesus with the most unlovable

humanity. After graduation, he gave his entire fortune to Christian work and went to spend the remainder of his life laboring among the heathen in Africa's "coffin corner." He sent all his possessions out in a wooden box six feet long, two feet wide, and two feet deep. The missionaries who went to that particular place all knew that within a matter of months their bodies would be sent back home in the same boxes they had used for packing their things. The average missionary lasted about six months. Borden made it for seventeen months.

Often we think that if we live by faith, our work is simply going to prosper. First-term missionaries sometimes go to the field expecting instant "success." God doesn't always bless with great numbers and thriving churches, especially at first. Christians everywhere can be tempted to doubt God when the path on which He leads appears to be a dead end. We need to say, "I know this is right. How do I know it's right? I know my God. I know Him personally. I know how He works in my life, and this is better than what I would plan for my own life."



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Romans 12:1-21

1. *From time to time I find it helpful to ask myself, "Would I be willing to die for the sake of Jesus Christ?" Would you?*
2. *Has there been anything in your life which you felt God took away? Could it be that He was simply asking you to give it up?*
3. *Ask God to show you anything in your life He would want you to give up.*

All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful.

– Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*

No reserve, no regret, no retreat.

– William Borden, *Borden of Yale*

*O Love that wilt not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe, that in thine ocean depths its flow,
may richer, fuller be. O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee; I trace the rainbow through the rain,
and feel the promise is not vain that morn shall tearless be.
O Cross that liftest up my head, I dare not ask to fly from thee;
I lay in dust life's glory dead, and from the ground there blossoms red
life that shall endless be.*

– George Matheson, *Trinity Hymnal*

Living in Grace

One of MTW's core values is grace. We want to grasp God's grace personally so that we may share it globally. As part of our commitment to this principle, MTW's Spiritual Life Department holds a "Living in Grace" conferences for all our new missionaries. Its purpose is to demonstrate the way in which all of the Christian life is lived in the grace of God in Christ, and both missionaries and staff attend. The goal of LIG is to provide discipleship training which leads to being more fully equipped for life and ministry. Two testimonies from conference participants follow.

I was recently in a group studying 1 John, and we came across 1 John 2:15: "Do not love the world, or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." As we began to talk about it more and more, I realized that John was not talking about possessions as much as he was talking about the way I need to think and act. John says, "Do not think and act the way the world does, because the Lord does not think and act the way the world does."

As a Christian I believe that it is grace that separates me from the world. And it is grace that should cause me to act radically different than the way the world tells me to act. Though I know that in my head, I rarely act like I believe it.

When someone hurts me, I often hold it against them. When I sin, I don't confess all of it. When I am in a group of people I try to cover up my faults by flaunting my gifts. And I often use the areas in which I have been "faithful" to God, to hide the areas where I have been unfaithful.

When I see my sin, my temptation is to pick myself up, and do a better job of living in grace. I need to forgive more, I need to confess more, I need to let go of my pride, I need to . . . But I have been gently reminded that the "I need tos" are not helping me believe in grace, they are only making me think that I can change myself. Maybe if I try a little harder I might do better. This is the thinking of the world . . . "try harder" . . . "do better" . . . "pick yourself up."

The reason why the gospel is so hard for me to comprehend is because it is contrary to the way the world thinks and acts—and the way I think and act.

I have realized that when I try to change myself and make myself presentable to God, I am trying to add to the grace that He has extended to me. I am trying to add to His work on the cross, even though it was sufficient to cover all of my sins. Instead of trying to be good enough, I need to ask the Lord to search me, to forgive my sin, and to change my heart. It is only when He changes my heart that I can truly experience His grace in my life. When He convicts and I begin to realize my own sin, I see how much He has forgiven me and my pride goes out the window. My heart and attitude change and I respond to Him by thanking Him for His forgiveness instead of demanding that He notice my good and spiritual acts.

To live in His grace daily is for me to realize that His ways are different and opposite from my ways. My way is to grab and try to do more; His way is for me to humbly repent and to rest in His grace and the work that He accomplished on the cross.

— Ami Franklin McNay

Ami Franklin McNay served as assistant to the two-year director for MTW's Short Term Department. Along with MTW missionaries, she was a participant in a Living in Grace conference.



One issue that I've had to face more than any other since going through Living in Grace is pride. That's nothing new for me, but this is a new battle because what I'm proud of is my head knowledge of grace. It is so easy for me to lapse into being judgmental of others when I perceive that they don't understand grace or when I perceive that they fail to show it to others.

(Of course, I'm not so strict with myself when I fail.) If I'm not paying close attention to my attitudes, grace quickly becomes a work for me. I can become a Living-in-Grace Pharisee in an instant, a Living-in-Grace hypocrite as soon as someone else doesn't measure up.

I find that I can easily substitute the "work" of grace for the heart of the gospel. To begin to grasp true grace, I need to begin to grasp who I am as a sinner, who God is, and the relationship that exists between God and me because of what He has done for me. Other people do not factor into that equation. But when I focus on the "work" of grace, I circumvent true grace and I turn it into a form of comparison with other people. That's about as man-centered as one can get.

But then there's true grace. God calls me to repentance, and He embraces me. He forgives me, and He restores me. He loves me. He is happy with me. I am His child. He is my Father. What else matters?

— Steve Robertson

Steve Roberston and his wife, Amy, attended a Living in Grace conference in preparation for their assignment to Mexico with MTW in 1999. Steve now serves as MTW international director for the Americas.



How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, "Violence!" but you do not save?

– Habakkuk 1:2



he preacher was angry! He had given his life to God’s service. He had preached and preached, and no one had listened. In fact, there was more sin in his environment since he began preaching than there was before he began. Disappointment and disillusionment had set in, and Habakkuk brought his complaint to God.

One of the great recurring themes in Scripture is that of faith on trial, the refining of the believer’s faith through perplexity and pain, twists of providence that we never would have chosen and that often bring us to question the goodness of God. Habakkuk begins his prophecy of warning against wayward Judah, and no successful ministry develops. Almost immediately he begins to whine.

At first glance, he appears to be a lot like modern man. How many times have you heard the question, “If there really is a God, then why did He allow the Holocaust to happen?” Or a school shooting? Or some other disaster?

Habakkuk’s questions echo down the centuries.

On closer observation, I believe that Habakkuk is just a good son of Adam. Adam and Eve weren’t hungry. They had countless trees bearing fruit for them to eat. They ate all kinds of food, but Satan said, “Has not God said that if you eat of the fruit of this tree you’ll know as God knows?” In other words, you’ll be able to take control of your own life, of your own destiny. Ever since the fall, all of us, even those in ministry, have wanted to be in control.

We sin because we want to usurp God’s place. Habakkuk is a son of Adam, and he, too, wants to be in control. He wants his ministry to spread.

He wants to transform the culture, he wants the people to return to worship God, and it’s not working that way. He is a fallen usurper, and his root problem is that he wants to be in control. Isn’t he exactly like us? We all have our means of exerting control, of “winging it,” of trying to live independently of God. We have countless devices to make sure we manage our personal agenda and our environment on our own.

Some people use anger as a means of control. I still remember a sixth-grade bully named Billy who lorded it over the playground when I was in kindergarten. He was bigger, tougher, madder, and meaner than anyone else.

Others control with threats. “If you don’t plan this project my way (or come to my party, or wear certain clothes, etc.), I’ll make you pay.”

Often we attempt to control others through manipulation. We love our children. We want them to come to Christ, so we try to manipulate them into some kind of decision. We need to be on our knees for our children and plead with God to work in their lives.

Perfectionism is another typical form of control. The attempt to have everything in order, under our purview, done our way, can be a very socially acceptable device to try to impress God and others.

God may have some surprises for us, as He had for Habakkuk.

One of the most ludicrous attempts at control is worry. It's the dumbest thing in the world. The psychology of worry goes like this: "If I worry enough, everything will be OK."

I have worked with alcoholics, and I am absolutely convinced that many people take that route to control. They anesthetize their brains so that everything is the same. They may be killing themselves, but they at least think they're in control.

God, however, brings Habakkuk to realize that God's plans are better than his, to relinquish everything to God. We need to be in that position as much as he did. It is the place to which we need to return over and over.



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Habakkuk 1-2

1. *On a scale of one to ten, how would you measure your need to be in control?*
2. *What form does control take in your life?*
3. *Ask God to show you areas where you need to relinquish control to God.*

... I buried myself in accomplishments, because with accomplishments,

I believed I could control things.

– Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie*

It is nearer to such as you than you think. There have been men before now who got so interested in proving the existence of God that they came to care nothing for God Himself... as if the good Lord had nothing to do but exist! There have been some who were so occupied in spreading Christianity that they never gave a thought to Christ.

– C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*



Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?

– Habakkuk 1:13



God reveals to Habakkuk that not only has Judah not repented, they are not going to repent. “For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. I am raising up the Babylonians, that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own” (Habakkuk 1:5b-6). God has raised up the Chaldeans under Nebuchadnezzar, and they will be used to bring judgment on Judah. He will employ greater evil to punish lesser evil, sending Nebuchadnezzar to clean up the mess. Habakkuk doesn’t understand, but God works in the way He wants to. You and I are not going to tell Him what to do.

God doesn’t tell us how He works, and Habakkuk is distraught. He says, “Now, God, I’ve got a problem.” He reminds God that He is eternal, holy, righteous, and just. It just doesn’t compute with him that God is going to use evil to bring about His purpose.

“God, why are you doing this?”

I think one thing we learn from this is that if you’re going to have a relationship with God, it needs to be an honest relationship. If you’re going to respond to God in faith, it has to be an honest response. When you have doubts, you need to bring those doubts before God. When you are confused, you need to say, “God I am confused. I’m going to take a step, and then I’ll take another step and see how that goes, but, God, I am confused.”

Habakkuk believes that his is the most important question: “God, why are you doing this?”

God answers with what I believe is the most important verse in the Bible, “The just shall live by his faith” (Habakkuk 2:4 KJV). It is quoted three times in the New Testament (Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, Hebrews 10:38). When Martin Luther read it in Romans, it struck him as no other verse ever had. This verse lit the fire of the Reformation!

The only way you can respond to God is by faith. The only way you can know God, worship God, or please God is by faith.

I believe this truth is supremely practical. I think a lot of us just want to leave it at the point where Luther picked it up, at the point of justification. We think that is all it means. We need to see that every step of life we take needs to be a step of

faith. It is a step of faith when we first understand our lost condition and respond in belief and repentance. Then we need faith every day. When disappointments come, we need to go to God and say, “I don’t understand this, but I believe that this is better.” That’s a hard prayer, because you can believe something without feeling it.

When you live by faith, what do you get? You don’t always have monetary success. If you have cancer, you aren’t always healed. In the book of Habakkuk everything failed. Habakkuk himself was carried off into captivity in Babylon. Nothing went right for him, but what happened?

What is the fruit of faith? Look at what he says.

*Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines,
Though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food,
Though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls,
Yet will I rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior.
(Habakkuk 3:17-18)*

If you live by faith, you don’t get everything you want, but what you do get is God: God’s presence in your life, the personal presence of God. That is the blessing. Nothing is greater than that. We get God. He doesn’t promise us much of anything else; but when you have God, you have everything.



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Habakkuk 3

1. *If you could ask God any question, what would you ask Him?*
2. *What do you believe would be a faith response on your part to your own question?*
3. *In what areas of your life do you need to trust God’s grace and wisdom?*

He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

– Jim Elliot

And I about made up my mind to pray, and see if I could try to quit being the kind of a boy I was and be better . . . But the words wouldn’t come . . . It warn’t no use to try and hide it from Him . . . deep down in me I knowed it was a lie, and He knowed it. You can’t pray a lie—I found that out.

– Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*



Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!

– 2 Corinthians 5:17



he Bible teaches that we are justified when we come to Christ in faith. *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* says, “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”

It is crucial to understand the doctrine of justification, that act of God’s free grace which has taken place once for all in the death and resurrection of Jesus. However, it is equally essential to understand the doctrine of sanctification.

Countless Christians have reached the point of burnout, have become depressed, and have derailed in effectiveness due to faulty notions and untrue teaching on the doctrine of sanctification. *The Shorter Catechism* calls sanctification “the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.”

Justification is an act, final, completed in the past. Sanctification is a work, continuing on and on. I sometimes think of justification and sanctification as two mountains in the Christian life.

First is justification. I don’t need to tell you that we can’t climb that mountain. Only one Man ever climbed that mountain. He climbed it with a cross on His back, and at the top He hung on that cross. Justification is solely a work of Christ, which is administered in my life by the Holy Spirit as God takes that great act of sacrifice and applies it to my life.

However, there is another mountain, and that mountain, the mountain of sanctification, requires us to act. The regenerate human will is involved. We may climb the mountain. If we climb well and come within one step from the top of the mountain, how many steps are we from the bottom? Only one. Even the most sanctified person on the face of earth is still such a sinner that he is capable of the vilest and grossest sin we can imagine. We must never forget that. No matter where God takes us, we are still always totally in need of the blood of Christ. God does bring experiential righteousness into our lives. We do grow, and it is possible to become more like Him. Sanctification works.

Nevertheless, when that sanctification works we are no less in need of the blood of Jesus Christ than when we first came to Him.

This humbles us to a posture of repentance, because we believe that even if one of us became the most sanctified person who ever lived, we would be just as much in need of repentance as when we came to Him in our justification. It is a posture in which we believe that if there is any maturity in our lives, it is borrowed from the One Who died for us. This is reality. Jesus died for us. He cleanses us. He enables us to live for Him as we come to Him over and over in a lifestyle of repentance and faith.



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Ephesians 4:20-32

1. *Many think of repentance as only an act. However, if it is also the posture of the Christian life, how will it make you look?*
2. *How would you like the reality of repentance to grow in your life? In what way can repentance produce freedom and joy?*
3. *Ask God to give you a repentant heart.*

It would be nice, and fairly nearly true, to say that "from that time forth Eustace was a different boy." To be strictly accurate, he began to be a different boy. He had relapses. There were still many days when he could be very tiresome. But most of those I shall not notice. The cure had begun.

– C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*

Repentance is a way of life for a Christian.

– Martin Luther (in the first of his *Ninety-Five Theses* nailed to the door of the Wittenberg Church)

*The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.*

– John Newton

I made no resolutions to be a better man. I simply cast myself on the Lord to do with me whatever He wanted.

– John Newton, *Letters of a Slave Trader*



Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit.

– Psalm 32:1-2



It is a wonderful thing to know the blessing of a repentant heart. When we understand what God has done in our lives, when we understand the foundation of love and the magnitude of the grace we have received, we ought to find ourselves in the posture of the tax collector in Luke 18.

He was flattened before the Lord, knowing that “he was not worthy even to look up to heaven.” Repentance ought not to be simply an act that we do, but a way in which we live.

In 2 Samuel 12 and Psalm 51, God uses King David as a graphic example to teach us repentance. The story is a familiar one. David has lusted after a young woman and has committed adultery with her. He has attempted to cover sin with more sin by sending her husband into battle. He actually caused a large part of his own army to be killed and brought tragedy and grief to hundreds of families in order to cover his transgression. He proceeds with “business as usual,” in apparent blindness to his guilt until God sends the prophet Nathan. When Nathan knocks him in the head with the story of the rich man who slaughtered the poor man’s one precious ewe lamb, his repentance is immediate and complete.

“I have sinned against the Lord” (2 Samuel 12:13).

He doesn’t say anything else. He only says, “I have sinned against the Lord.” His words in Psalm 51:4 are almost identical. “Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.” David sees that he has no excuse; he has no place to go; he is under the wrath of God. He responds saying, “God, I’m guilty.” That is really the essence of repentance.

“It’s me. Not only is there a problem, but I am the problem.”

We see in David’s repentance that it is God-centered. “I have sinned against You. You are right to judge me.”

True repentance forgets the circumstances. There may be all kinds of extenuating circumstances in my sin, but when I come before God, they don’t matter. What matters is that the God who made me, the God who died for me, has been violated.

David’s repentance is from the heart. He opens up his heart and says, “You’re right.” There is not a lot of rationalizing. He doesn’t mull over it. He doesn’t shift

blame. He doesn't ruminate and think about it. He doesn't get out a textbook and examine it to see what repentance is all about. It is a true expression of his heart.

Further, David's repentance appears to be driven by the Holy Spirit. I don't believe we as human beings can repent as David repented unless we are directed by the Holy Spirit; it happens when God is opening up my heart and showing me who I really am. It is through a work of the Holy Spirit that any of us may have that sense of repentance in our lives. We need to beg the Lord to cultivate that repentant lifestyle in us.



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Psalm 51

1. *Do you ever find yourself repenting and blame-shifting at the same time? Do you see how this is arguing with God?*
2. *Can you think of a relationship in which you have been hurt? Consider before God how you have responsibility for that relationship. Take responsibility before God for the situation. That is repentance. Tell God that not only is there a problem, but you are the problem.*
3. *How has repentance (or lack thereof) affected your worship?*

This is a wonderful pattern of prayer (Ps. 51) for anyone made aware of his sin and need of forgiveness, whether he is an unbeliever coming in repentance and faith to God for the first time, or a child coming to his father for forgiveness day by day.

Such a prayer may be a part of a person's conversion or an expression of his convertedness. Either way, the plea is for mercy on the basis of God's steadfast love. God has promised to forgive and restore those who come to him hating their sins and wanting to be saved from them. He did it for David; he will do it for us, too.

– J.I. Packer

(The prodigal son) was resolved to come, yet he was half afraid. But we read that his father ran. Slow are the steps of repentance, but swift are the feet of forgiveness. God can run where we can scarcely limp, and if we are limping toward him, he will run toward us.

– Charles Spurgeon, *Prodigal Love for the Prodigal Son*

God, Give Grace!

*Generous in love—God give grace!
Huge in mercy—wipe out my bad record.
Scrub away my guilt,
Soak out my sins in your laundry,
I know how bad I've been;
My sins are staring me down.
You're the One I've violated, and you've seen
it all, seen the full extent of my evil.
You have all the facts before you;
whatever you decide about me is fair.
I've been out of step with you for a long time,
in the wrong since before I was born.
What you're after is truth from the inside out.
Enter me, then conceive a new, true life.
Soak me in your laundry and I'll come out clean
scrub me and I'll have a snow-white life.
Tune me into foot-tapping songs
set these once-broken bones to dancing.
Don't look too close for blemishes,
give me a clean bill of health.
God, make a fresh start in me,
shape a Genesis week from the chaos of my life.
Don't throw me out with the trash,
Or fail to breathe holiness in me.
Bring me back from gray exile,
Put a fresh wind in my sails!
Give me a job teaching rebels your ways
So the lost can find their way home.
Commute my death sentence, God, my salvation God,
And I'll sing anthems to your life-giving ways.
Unbutton my lips, dear God;
I'll let loose with your praise.
Going through the motions doesn't please you,
a flawless performance is nothing to you.
I learned God-worship
when my pride was shattered.
Heart-shattered lives ready for love
don't for a moment escape God's notice.
Make Zion the place you delight in,
repair Jerusalem's broken-down walls.
Then you'll get real worship from us,
acts of worship small and large,
Including all the bulls
they can heave onto your altar.*

– Psalm 51 Eugene Peterson, *The Message*

A Hymn to God the Father

*Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
Which was my sin though it were done before?
Wilt thou forgive that sin through which I run,
And do run still, though still I do deplore?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.
Wilt thou forgive that sin by which I've won
Others to sin, and made my sin their door?
Wilt thou forgive that sin I shunned
A year or two, but wallowed in a score?
When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.
I have a sin of fear, that when I've spun
My last thread, I shall perish on that shore;
But swear by thyself that at my death thy Son
Shall shine as heretofore;
And having done that, thou hast done;
I have no more.*

– John Donne



Search me, O God, and know my heart; Test me, and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, And lead me in the way everlasting.

– Psalm 139:22-23



As we come to God and we ask Him to develop a repentant lifestyle in us, I believe we need a whole new paradigm.

Usually when we consider repentance, we think about a particular sin, some specific thing I have done that I need to confess to God and to forsake. This, of course, is vital, but I believe we need to see repentance not simply as an act, but as a posture, a way of life.

Luther said in his *Ninety-five Theses*, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ says ‘repent,’ He means that the whole life of believers on earth should be a constant and perpetual repentance.”

How do we cultivate a repentant posture?

First, repentance grows out of a dependent heart. We know that repentance involves a change in direction. It is not only turning from sin, it is turning to God. David cries out from a dependent heart, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10).

He has seen the depth of his sin. He doesn’t turn to his own personal discipline to take care of it. He doesn’t say, “God, You are right, and I am going to change this. God, You are right and I’m going to turn myself around and go in another direction. From now on, I’ll be good.” He is not self-righteous in his repentance. When his eyes are opened to his sin, he says, “You are right.” Then he says, “God, do something.” Repentance is not only believing there is a problem and knowing that you are the problem, but also knowing you can’t deal with it without God. Cleansing righteousness through repentance comes only when God creates a pure heart within us. There is no other way.

Next, repentance comes from a heart that realizes that pride and self-righteousness are the greatest expressions of sin. Pride is the supreme expression of sin, “the great-granddaddy of all the rest.” I am full of it. Every cell of my body oozes pride and self-righteousness. If you want to see the depth of people’s sin, don’t go to their bars and casinos. Go to their places of worship. These may be blatant where idolatry and pagan worship abound, but I believe that in the American church also our worship can be so man-centered and our hearts so self-centered (even in public worship) that it must seem to God to be the expression of a sinful heart.

Further, repentance comes from a heart willing to examine itself. In Psalm 139, David cries out to God to search his heart. He realizes that it is both useless

and foolish to try to hide from God. He is ready and willing for his secrets to be exposed, to deal with the hard questions. We need to live in repentance as David came to do, to say, “God, tell me. Are there any faithless ways in me? In what ways do I live as if You don’t exist? In what ways do I live as if what Christ has done for me has no impact on my life?”

A heart like this can only come by the mercy of God.



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Psalm 139

1. Pray verses 22-23 asking God to expose your heart and your sin. Are there ways that you are not trusting Him? Jot down any ideas that God’s Spirit shows you.
2. What things would not change in your life at all, even if God did not exist?
3. Ask God to lead you to a life of faith in His everlasting way.

Faith is the acknowledgment of the entire absence of all goodness in us, and the recognition of the cross as the substitute for all the want on our part. The whole work is His, not ours, from first to last.

– Horatius Bonar, *The Everlasting Righteousness*

I have read of many wicked popes, but the worst pope I have ever met is Pope Self.

– John Newton, *The Life of John Newton*

The gospel is like fish. It must be caught fresh every day.

– John Q. Hall

Gratitude . . . is a response to grace. The compassionate life is a grateful life, and actions born out of gratefulness are not compulsive but free, not somber but joyful, not fanatical but liberating.

– Henri Nouwen, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*



Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.

– Proverbs 3:5



he story is told that as the great theologian John Owen lay on his deathbed, he was dictating a letter to his secretary.

“I am still in the land of the living,” he said. “No, change that.

I am still in the land of the dying, but I hope soon to be in the land of the living”

Owen saw life from that God-centered perspective that we all need. This world is temporary. God has placed us here for His own reasons, and, if we are believers, we are strangers and pilgrims en route to the land of the living. What a change in mindset this gives us in our daily lives!

It is this outlook that motivates us to live in submission to Him and to depend on Him for everything.

I remember when my little granddaughter had just learned to sit up. She would spot an object two or three feet away on the floor. She would rock herself into a crawling position and flail her arms and legs. She could see where she wanted to go, but she couldn’t get there. After a while she would be totally exhausted, and she would bury her head in the rug and wail for help. That is actually the same position in which God commands us to place ourselves, when He says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart.” He literally means, “Come before God and fall prostrate before Him with your head buried in the dirt.” It is a position of total submission and total dependence. It underscores our desire to hold every blessing with an open hand and to remember that every affliction is “but for a moment.”

It also means taking the long-range view of our lives and our ministries. For some missionaries it may mean laboring for a lifetime in a place where fruit may not be seen for a hundred years.

A favorite missionary of mine is Adoniram Judson, one of the first Americans ever to travel to another country for the purpose of spreading the gospel.

Judson went to Burma in 1813. He ministered there for six years before seeing a single convert. During a war between England and Burma he was believed to be a British spy and imprisoned in the filthy, vermin-infested Let-may-yoon (“Death Prison”) for a year and a half.

His beautiful wife, Ann (also called Nancy), was allowed to visit him frequently, bringing food and clean clothing. Befriending government officials, guards, and anyone else with influence, Ann encouraged her husband with her untiring spirit,

often concealing notes of encouragement in the spout of a teapot. It is reported that Ann would whisper to him, “Adoniram, hang on. God alone is our victory.” As the time of his release neared she quit coming, and her husband feared that she had died. Finally arriving at home, he discovered her alive, but barely recognizable from disease—skin and bones, her black curls shorn, and her head covered in a close-fitting cotton cap.

In the same room a Burmese nurse held a baby so thin and dirty that Judson didn’t realize that it was his own child, Maria.

Though they experienced a brief recovery, both Ann and Maria died several months later. She was the first of his three wives, two of whom died while serving in Burma. According to historians, he also lost several children—as many as five or six—in that place. Through tremendous suffering, he went on to translate the entire Bible into the native language. Along with his colleagues he saw literally thousands believe in Christ and receive public baptism. Today it is reported that there is a church thriving among the mountain people in a country where missionaries have not been allowed to go since 1956.

This is what God did with one man who trusted the Lord with all his heart. He calls us also to this submission, this dependence, and to acknowledge Him in all our ways.



READ, THINK, & PRAY

1 Peter 4:12-19

1. *If we focus on the “land of the living,” how will it bring meaning and purpose to the “land of the dying”?*
2. *In what practical ways do you need to trust God rather than lean on your own understanding?*

*By grace I am thy freeman and would serve thee, for I believe thou art my God in Jesus,
and that through him I am redeemed, and my sins are forgiven.*

*With this freedom I would always obey thee, but I cannot walk in liberty,
any more than I could first attain it, of myself.*

May thy Spirit draw me nearer to thee and thy ways.

– “Christian Love,” *The Valley of Vision*

Ah, the Saved . . . what happens to them is best described as the opposite of a mirage.

*What seemed, when they entered it, to be the vale of misery turns out, when they
look back, to have been a well; and where present experience saw only salt deserts,
memory truthfully records that the pools were full of water.*

– C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*



In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight

– Proverbs 3:6



For nine consecutive summers I led conferences in a place called Horn Creek, Colorado. During eight of those summers, friends and I hiked a 14,000-foot mountain called Horn Peak. The climb was tough, but the descent was worse. We would begin panting and longing for the Rainbow Trail, the first horizontal path, after

hours and hours on the vertical slope.

Every time I said to myself, “Paul, if you ever make it back to flat land, don’t ever be crazy enough to do this again!” Then the next summer I would go right back up.

We all have known the yearning for straight, level paths. We live in a fallen, crooked world, and there are myriad convoluted, dead-end trails enticing us. In Proverbs God clearly tells us that the way to straight paths is to trust in Him with all our heart, to acknowledge Him in all our ways. Proverbs has been called “theology in work clothes.” It is essential that we see these verses in chapter three as key to the entire book. Otherwise, all those instructions can lead us to a false sense of trust in our own righteousness.

When we are serious about trusting Him, we have to realize that this means that we are not to trust in our own ways, our own evaluation of circumstances. It is so easy to proceed with our own plans and then tack God onto our agenda, to say, “Well, this is Christian work. I’m one of God’s chosen. God is obligated to bless me.”

Don’t we have the tendency to plan and then pray? We need to learn to submit our plans to Him before we make them, to pray first, then to plan. We need to saturate our plans in prayer, to ask God to show us His ways, to acknowledge our dependence on Him, even in the smallest things.

Living in submission to Him means saying, “What will You do with me? I’m willing for You to do anything.” That only happens by God’s grace, as He causes us to love Him as He loves us. He gives us the perspective to see that He is more real than the ministries that He has given us, more powerful than the problems that we face. His love is greater than any rejection we deal with.

It is reported that in the year 1792, a diary was found floating in the ocean. A sailor had written the following message on one page: “If you hear that our ship has sunk, don’t cry. This ocean is but a puddle in the hand of my Savior. If you are defeated with fear, if you are cowered in some corner of life, if you are paralyzed by fear, you can be set free. All you’ve got to do is depend on God.”

Are we willing to recognize that we are mere molecules in God's puddle? That's when He will remind us that our way is not hidden from Him, and He will direct our paths.



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Psalm 27

1. To acknowledge God means more than to give mental ascent to His existence. It means to declare that He is God and He is in control. What will this look like in your own life?

2. What in your life needs straightening? (Proverbs 3:5-6)

3. Acknowledge to God that you believe there are no accidents. How does this change your view of the circumstances of your life?

The man who does not permit his spirit to be beaten down and upset by dryness and helplessness, but who lets God lead him peacefully through the wilderness, and desires no other support or guidance than that of pure faith and trust in God alone, will be brought to the Promised Land.

– Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*

Christianity is not the sacrifice we make, but the sacrifice we trust; not the victory we win, but the victory we inherit. That is the evangelical principle.

– P.T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God*

Only the man who follows the command of Jesus single-mindedly, and unresistingly lets his yoke rest upon him, finds his burden easy, and under its gentle pressure receives the power to persevere in the right way. The command of Jesus is hard, unutterably hard, for those who try to resist it. But for those who willingly submit, the yoke is easy, and the burden is light.

– Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

*What though the accuser roar
Of ills that we have done;
We know them well plus thousands more;
Jehovah knoweth none.*

– Samuel W. Gandy, "His Be the Victor's Name"



... and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

– *Philippians 3:9*



Over 100 years ago, the eldest daughter of James Henley Thornwell became engaged, and the family planned a splendid celebration. Tragically, she contracted a deadly fever and passed away only a few days before the marriage was scheduled. Because means of communication were poor, dignitaries from all over the South traveled great distances without realizing that they would attend a funeral rather than a wedding. At the front of the church her loved ones had laid out her body, dressed in all her bridal finery. Across the casket was draped a banner with these words from Revelation 21: “And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned from her husband” (Revelation 21:2 NASB).

By faith the young lady’s family knew that even though she would never be an earthly bride, she was already a part of the bride of Christ. They had witnessed her faith and the new heart she had been given by God while she was still alive on earth.

The greatest miracle I know is the change in the human heart through the work of the Holy Spirit. In the book of Ezekiel, God promised, “I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be My people, and I will be their God” (Ezekiel 11:19-20).

We marvel at modern medicine and the lives that have been saved by heart transplants. God is giving us spiritual heart transplants that are just as real as any physical heart transplant. He has transformed hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. He has made dead hearts alive. The reason sanctification is possible is that God renews the heart. Sanctification is not just a mechanical process. It is living and active in the lives of God’s people. Sanctification will never lead to perfection in this life, because, as Calvin says, “The old man is still hanging around.” Sanctification will never bring us to a point where we are not in constant need of the mercy of God. Nevertheless, through His Word and His Spirit, God is constantly changing and shaping our lives. We all know that our lives, our habits, our speech, manners, taste, and clothing are affected by the company we keep. As we habitually draw close to Jesus, He puts His imprint on our lives. He implants His beauty into His people and cultivates that beauty in ways we could never imagine.

Perhaps you have attended, as I have, the wedding of a friend that you have always considered somewhat plain; a fine person, just not very attractive. You got to the wedding, heard someone say, “Have you ever seen such a beautiful bride?” and

you realized that it was true. The love of her groom, the mere knowledge that she was loved and chosen by someone she considered wonderful, had transformed her into a radiant beauty. God calls us His bride, and He works the same remarkable change in us.



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Revelation 21:1-7

1. *In what way can the radiance of Christ be reflected in your life?*
2. *In what ways is your life more Christlike than it was when you first came to Christ as a believer?*

*I am always going into the far country,
and always returning home as a
prodigal, always saying,
Father, forgive me, and thou art
always bringing forth the best robe.
Every morning let me wear it,
every evening return in it,
go out to the day's work in it,
be married in it,
be wound in death in it,
stand before the great white throne in it,
enter heaven in it shining as the sun.
– The Valley of Vision*

*I need to repent of my repentance;
I need my tears to be washed;
I have no robe to bring to cover my sins,
no loom to weave my own righteousness;
I am always standing clothed in filthy garments,
and by grace am always receiving change of raiment,
for thou dost always justify the ungodly . . .
– The Valley of Vision*



You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

– Matthew 5:14-16



God calls missionaries to be lights in a dark world, shining “like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life” (Philippians 2:15c-16a). He calls all of us to be His witnesses in the world, and we long for effectiveness in spreading the gospel. There is verbal content to the gospel, but there is also behavioral content. People need to see the gospel as well as to hear it. How are people going to see the gospel?

It all really begins with humility. In Galatians 5, we read of the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” Why is humility not listed? I believe it is because humility is the umbrella under which all the rest of these fruits fit. Humility is the sum of the fruit of the Spirit. In his book *Humility* Andrew Murray wrote:

Humility is the soil in which the graces of the Christian life root. The lack of humility is the sufficient explanation of every defect and failure. Humility is not so much grace or virtue along with the others. It is the root of all, because it alone takes the right attitude before God and allows God to be God and to do all.

The humble heart is a heart like Christ’s. It is of a different quality than the unbeliever’s heart, because it has been made alive by the Holy Spirit. When I think of the heart of Jesus, I think of a heart of love. Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Note that Christ’s love looks outward rather than inward. He cares for others rather than Himself. He told us very plainly to love one another and that our unity will be a witness to the world. Sometimes love is revealed in a one-time act of sacrifice, but it is more often demonstrated in the daily laying down of our lives described in 1 Corinthians 13: “Love is patient; love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

Do we see anything of that love in our own lives? When we are dealing with our spouse and children, our colleagues, even our enemies (especially our enemies), are those qualities evident in us? When we look at others, we need to ask ourselves, “What do I see of Christ in this person?”

The love of God frees me to love others rather than myself. It is the solid foundation of marriages, of family life, in fact of all human relationships.



READ, THINK, & PRAY

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

1. *We were born lovers of self. What evidence do you see of this in your own life?*
2. *It is important to write what the Holy Spirit reveals. This requires us to acknowledge our sin and shows us how we can change our behavior to reflect our hearts.*
3. *In what ways could you exercise self-giving (Christlike) love in your life?*

Nothing sets a person so much out of the devil's reach as humility.

– Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*

A man is never so proud as when striking an attitude of humility.

– C.S. Lewis, *Christianity and Culture*

*Breathe on me, breath of God, fill me with life anew,
That I may love what thou dost love, and do what thou wouldst do.*

– Edwin Hatch, *Between Doubt and Prayer*



Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

– *Matthew 11:28-30*



Jesus tells us that when we come to Him, He gives us His yoke. What is that yoke? It is a yoke of humility. We see it in contrast to the yoke of the Pharisees, which is a yoke of pride. The yoke of pride is heavy, but Jesus tells us that the yoke of humility is light because it immerses the redeemed personality in the humility of the cross.

God tells us, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 2:5), and He goes on to describe the amazing humility that Jesus embodied as He went to the cross for us.

Christ’s perfect humiliation was the perfect manifestation of human life as God intended it (Philippians 2:3-11). Jesus doesn’t merely exemplify humility. He gives it to us, saying, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light.” It allows us to lay aside the things of this world for the richness we have in Christ. It frees us to live for others, because we are not living in our own strength. We have experienced the richness of God’s love in the cross.

The greatest irony I can imagine is that the most horrible event in all of human history, the cross, where the greatest agony and the greatest burden ever borne, becomes the yoke of hope, the yoke of peace, the yoke of freedom. He frees us from the heavy yoke of pride and self-dependence.

We all need this. Too often anger, malice, defensiveness, and improper speech characterize our lives. Where do these come from? Are they not manifestations of a heart of pride? Pride ruins everything. It ruins any position, any accomplishment. It can turn a minor disappointment into a major crisis and nullify our enjoyment in life. Further, it is the root of much dissension and enmity, even within the body of Christ. Proverbs says, “Pride only breeds quarrels” (Proverbs 13:10a). It can turn friends into enemies. It can, in fact, make any one of us into our own worst enemy, causing us to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think (Philippians 2:3), robbing us of a teachable spirit, and setting us up for a crash. Tragically, our pride deafens the watching world to the message of the gospel.

Humility is the antithesis of pride. We need to pray that God would bless us with a Christlike humility, that He would show us our pride and turn us from it.

Robert Murray McChesney wrote on November 3, 1841, “Oh, for a closer communion with God, until my soul and my body, my head and face and my heart shine with divine brilliance. But, oh, for holy ignorance of my shining. God, make me holy, but don’t let me see my own holiness.”

He went on to write to a friend, “Pray for this, for you need it as well as me.”

A passage of Scripture that I love and that I have memorized is Psalm 25. Here we see David’s humility and dependence on God. This psalm is a wonderful starting point as we ask Him to plant that humility in us.



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Psalm 25

1. *Don't be surprised by the pride you find in your life; it is the chief characteristic of a fallen human being. Just acknowledge it in repentance wherever God reveals it.*
2. *Do you see humility as an outward behavior or as an attitude of the heart? Are you guilty of behaving the way you think a humble person might, but without humility of heart?*
3. *Pray for greater humility to look more like Christ.*

Pride is the vulture which may exult in sailing a little above the tree-tops, because its eye is fixed on the earth and the foul garbage with which it desires to glut itself, while it becomes foul itself and loathsome as its food. Humility is the eagle soaring into the upper sky, yet never judging itself to have risen high, because its eye is fixed upon the distant sun.

– Robert L. Dabney, *The Practical Philosophy*

*And the Devil did grin,
for his darling sin
Is the pride
that apes humility.*

– Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Devil's Thoughts"



If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.

– *Philippians 2:1-2*



he humility of Christ is revealed in all its brilliance and loveliness in Philippians 2:1-11. It is a passage that we all should contemplate, meditate on, and submit to continually; and we should ask God to work it into our lives. For the believer it is even more than a beautiful portrait of the person and work of Christ, a clear revelation of who He is and what He did. It is God’s instruction to us on relationships.

What is the key to loving, God-honoring Christian relationships? Is it not a humble spirit? Is it not a true Christlikeness in the Christian heart? Is it not taking seriously the beautiful teaching of Philippians 2, laying aside selfish ambition and empty conceit, considering others better than ourselves, looking out for the interests of others?

Look again at the life of Jesus. He was not bogged down in this world. Consequently, He was able to enjoy this world. (That sounds like a contradiction, but really it is one of God’s paradoxes.) He was here to do His Father’s will, and He was able to trust the Father to bring or to withhold whatever power, position, and prestige He chose. He didn’t worry about His public image or His own self-esteem. He didn’t live on an emotional yo-yo string over the “successes” and “failures” of His ministry. When His disciples came soaring back from subduing demons, He reminded them, “Do not rejoice . . . but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20). Jesus was free from being controlled by circumstances. His controlling force was the desire to please God rather than to generate “PR,” to please himself, or to impress others. He was secure to love and minister as God had sent Him to do. Don’t we want to be like Jesus in this way?

How can this Christlike spirit become a reality in our lives? 1 Peter 5:6 says, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.” Realistically, if we don’t humble ourselves voluntarily, God will see to it that we are humbled involuntarily. We need to acknowledge our dependence on God. Dependence is the quickest route to humility. We need to remind ourselves that He is the Creator of our very life, the author and finisher of our faith, and the source of all our gifts. Any abilities or position we have came from Him. We need to ask Him to bring us out of our sense of self-sufficiency to an awareness of our dependence on Him. Dependence leads to a spirit of thankfulness. Thanksgiving will lift you up to a state of humility faster than anything I know, and thanksgiving grows out of a deep sense of dependence.

Ecclesiastes tells us of the foolishness of pride. “Vanity . . . vanity.” (Ecclesiastes 1:2 KJV). Blaise Pascal wrote, “The infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object. In other words, by God Himself. If we are trying to fill that void with anything we can produce ourselves in our pride, we will be hungry forever.”



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Philippians 2:1-11

1. *Christ had no reason to be humble; yet He lived the only truly humble life. What does that teach you about your own need for humility?*
2. *Consider the testimony of Satan in Isaiah 14:13-14. Is your life a closer reflection of Satan or a reflection of Christ?*
3. *In what way does humility set one free?*

Charis always demands the answer eucharistia (that is, grace always demands the answer of gratitude.) Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice an echo. Gratitude follows grace as thunder follows lightning.
 – Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*

A first experience of God's grace could feel as if we have landed in a world where 2+2 might knock at our door and introduce herself as 5, where when a wrench falls out of our hand, it rises to the ceiling. There is a weightlessness about grace. It has the feel of a fairy tale; what makes it a very special fairy tale is that it is true.
 – Lewis B. Smedes, *Shame and Grace*

Humility is not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.
 – C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

Divine grace can make the coward brave. The smoking flax can flame forth like fire on the altar when the Lord wills it. These very apostles who were timid as hares, grew to be bold as lions after the Spirit had descended upon them, and even so the Holy Spirit can make my recreant spirit brave to confess my Lord and witness for His truth.
 – Charles Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*



Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them.

- Hebrews 7:25



One of my favorite movies back in elementary school was the story of the young boxer, Rocky Marciano, the precursor to the more sophisticated *Rocky* movies. Rocky is the guy with less talent, less money, less training, and more heart than anyone else, the kind of guy we all like to root for. He was the guy who, in spite of all his limitations, happened to be at the right place at the right time. The title of that original movie was *Somebody Up There Likes Me*. I often think the title of my own life story would be *Somebody Up There Intercedes for Me*.

In the first chapter of Revelation, God gives John a vision of heaven. There he sees the glorified Jesus walking among the lampstands, dressed in the attire of the Old Testament high priests. Jesus is busy there interceding for the Church, applying His blood to our lives, pleading His own righteousness before the Father, reminding the just God that His sacrifice was complete and that a new covenant has been effected. God's attitude toward you and toward me is changed because of this priestly work of His Son.

Jesus is placing His blood on our lives and saying, "You are as righteous as I am." God looks at us and says, "You are as righteous as I am, not because you really are, but because I say you are."

All through the Old Testament, our merciful God taught His people that He would make a way to cleanse them from their sins. Over and over and over again, animals were sacrificed to signify that "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22b). Sin is serious to God, and it must be punished. Year after year on the Day of Atonement, first in the tabernacle and later in the temple, the high priest went inside the veil of the holy of holies, to the presence of God to offer up sacrifices for the sins of the people. After the sacrifice was made, he would emerge through the curtain, visible to all, and a great shout of joy would go up. God had answered the prayer of the priest and the people's sins were covered for another year.

The New Testament makes it clear that every priest and every sacrifice offered in the Old Testament times were mere shadows and types of the Great High Priest, Jesus. On the cross the true High Priest became the sacrifice. The One who presented the sacrifice became the sacrifice, and the justice of God was totally satisfied.

From eternity it was God's plan that His Son would stand as the substitute, that Jesus' blood would pay for all our sins, for those who lived before the cross as well as those after it. The Old Testament believers had only shadows, a dim black-

and-white sketch. We have been given the fulfillment in full flesh and blood. Have you ever heard better news than that? Doesn't it make you want to worship Him, to thank Him and praise Him, to reflect His love, and to have some part in spreading the word to every soul on this earth?



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Hebrews 10:14-25

1. *What does it mean to have a High Priest in heaven interceding for you today?*
2. *When you pray today, remember you pray and God hears you through His Son, your intercessor in heaven.*

One of the most striking parts of the Day of Atonement is that of the scapegoat. The high priest placed both his hands on the head of a goat and confessed all the sins of the nation. Then the goat carrying the sins of the people is sent off into the wilderness. But it is not just a piece of history!

There is in the modern world a quest for scapegoats though with one enormous difference. Whenever there is an accident or a tragedy, there is a search for someone to blame. Often all the modern means of communication join in; accusations, resignations, demands for compensation and the rest.

... The enormous difference? The original scapegoat followed a confession of the sins of the people. There was no blaming of someone else, but an admission of guilt and a quest for the forgiveness of God.

– David Bronnert

To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.

– C.S. Lewis, Essay on Forgiveness



I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

- John 15:5



You may have heard the one-liner about the plumber who passed Niagara Falls, glanced over his shoulder, and said, “I think I could fix that leak.”

Realistically speaking, when we consider the demands of the Christian life, living up to God’s standard is as impossible as “fixing” Niagara Falls, jumping over Mt. Everest, or drinking the ocean dry. How can any of us be presumptuous enough to think we can do it?

God never designed the Christian life to be lived in our own power. Jesus, the only person ever to make it through this world without sin, lived every second by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are to live in the power of the Holy Spirit, too. The needs, burdens, hurts, and challenges of life are designed to throw us back on the mercy of God. The demands and expectations of being a Christian draw us to the Holy Spirit. He is here as our paraclete, the Helper called alongside of us in every situation.

All my life I’ve loved the game of basketball. If you ever got in a game of one-on-one with me, or if you watched me play in a pick-up game today, you’d say, “Well, Kooistra may have a lot of hustle, but actually he’s not very good.” You would be right, but if I were feeling insecure I’d be sure to let you know that when I was in junior high I was on a church league basketball team that won the Duluth, Minnesota, city championship for three years in a row. I played on that team, I heard the cheers, went to the banquet, had my picture taken with the trophy, and pasted the clippings in my scrapbook. I may not be very good, but for three consecutive seasons, I was a winner.

How could a scrappy little just-so kid be a winner? The truth was we had a real star on the team. Dave Johnson had reached his full height in seventh grade, and he was well-coordinated. The boy had springs in his legs. He could run, dribble, shoot, rebound, and touch the rim while the four of us followed him up and down the court. Dave won games and carried the team with him. Without him, we wouldn’t have won one game.

God, in His goodness, has given us an infinitely better “carrier” than Dave Johnson. His Holy Spirit is with us every step of the Christian life. The Holy Spirit is not “It,” but “He.” He is not some kind of liquid or “force,” but is the true and living God, the third Person of the Trinity. He is our paraclete, the Helper of every Christian. It is the Holy Spirit who works in us the desire to glorify God, who enables us to say, “Not my will, but Yours be done,” to love as He loved, to forgive

when wronged, to consider others more important than ourselves. Any good that we do is done in the power of the Holy Spirit. Any good fruit or any influence for Christ is produced by the Holy Spirit.

It is God's Spirit who opens doors for the gospel, waters arid ground, removes blinders and barriers, and transforms hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. It is never our own ingenuity or talent, never the power of our own personalities.

George Whitefield, that powerful revival preacher of the first Great Awakening, used to mount the stairs of whatever pulpit he used, saying to himself, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, I believe in the Holy Spirit." He understood the foolishness of preaching. He was used to bringing thousands into God's kingdom, because the Holy Spirit was working through him.



READ, THINK, & PRAY

John 15:1-11

1. *One of the great mysteries of the faith is that Jesus Christ, who is God, who is bigger than the universe, lives within us. Reflect on this work of the Holy Spirit. How does this make a difference in your life today?*
2. *How does your attitude change when you realize that you are to live as Christ did, not in your own power, but in the power of the Holy Spirit?*
3. *The purpose of the Holy Spirit is not to make you conscious of Himself, but to make you conscious of Christ. Pray for the deepening work of the Holy Spirit.*

The world does not need more of you; it needs more of God. Your friends do not need more of you; they need more of God. And you don't need more of you; you need more of God. For we do not progress in the Christian life by becoming more competent, more knowledgeable, more virtuous, or more energetic. We do not advance in the Christian life by acquiring expertise. Each day, and many times each day, we need more of God. Back to Square One.

– Eugene Peterson, *Crux*

Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me. Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me. Break me! Melt me! Mold me! Fill me! Spirit of the living God, fall fresh on me.

– Daniel Iverson

There dwells upon this earth a mysterious Being, whose office it is to renew the fallen and restore the wandering. We cannot see Him or hear Him, yet He dwells in some of us, as Lord of our nature. His chosen residence is a broken heart and a contrite spirit.

– Charles Spurgeon, *Cords and Cart-ropes*



So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!

– 1 Corinthians 10:12



One of my favorite C. S. Lewis books is *The Screwtape Letters*, that masterful correspondence between an apprentice demon, Wormwood, and Screwtape, his mentor. Wormwood writes frantically that his “victim has gone over to the enemy.” In spite of all his best efforts, the poor soul has come to faith in Christ.

“Never fear,” Screwtape rejoins. “Just convince him that he’s arrived.”

God, in His grace, gives us His law to point out to us that we have not arrived. The purpose of the law is to convict us of sin. The law functions as a mirror to reveal our sin. Paul calls the law a “tutor to lead us to Christ” (Galatians 3:24 NASB).

Like a roadmap, the law can direct us to Christ. It is not a road. It cannot take us to Christ, but it can direct us to Him. Only grace can drive us to Christ.

This presents a real dilemma to us as Christians, because there is a strong bent toward legalism in every one of us. We want to be able to take ourselves to God without help from anyone. Legalism adds to the law of God, taking the application of the law and raising it to the level of the law itself. It turns us into moral policemen, rule-oriented Pharisees. Legalism is so attractive to us because it excuses us from responsibility. We decide that if we learn the rules and play by the rules, we won't have to think. We won't have to depend on God's Spirit. We can be independent. A rule-oriented life is easier than grace-life. Habitually we abuse God's law in this way. We forget that the only righteousness we have is the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:4-5, “Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.”

One of the early church fathers, Chrysostom, said, “Bless God, that not only had He given him all the righteousness of Christ, but all that God required of him was also given by God.”

The law reveals the perfection of God's moral nature, showing us how far we fall short, reminding us that “we are not Him.” It is a tool in the hands of the Holy Spirit to puncture the believer's heart and turn him toward Christ. The law instructs us on how to love, but it does not empower us to love.

It is a blueprint for living together in godliness and harmony, but it does not enable us to love.

Philippians 2:13 says, “For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose.”

The ability to obey comes from God. When God is at work, we need not fear that liberty will lead to lawlessness. Rather we are free to obey, to live for His glory. The law produces bondage to sin. Grace liberates us from that bondage and motivates and enables us to want to live for God. Further, grace frees us from judgmentalism and a critical spirit. We are all in the same boat, totally undeserving of God’s benevolence, totally in need of grace.

A young businessman had fallen in love with a beautiful girl, but he was worried. What would his parents think? Would they approve of marriage to a newcomer in their small city? She had charm, but did she have upstanding character? Was there a hidden “past”?

He hired a private detective to check her out and soon received the following report: “The young lady has an unblemished past, but is occasionally seen in the company of a young businessman of dubious practices and principles.” He who kept the law to the very jot and tittle “made Himself of no reputation” for us. He made “him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf so that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21 NASB).



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Galatians 3:23-29

1. *Can you distinguish between the law and the application of the law? Think of an example in which you might be requiring of others what the Bible does not specifically require. Do you see any legalistic tendencies in yourself to elevate your application of God’s law to the level of the law itself?*
2. *Do you find any area in which you outwardly obey the law, but within your heart you are a law breaker?*
3. *In what areas would the law drive you back to Christ?*
4. *Thank God for His law. Pray that the law of God will drive you to Christ and direct you in your quest for holiness.*

*The law sends us to the gospel for our justification.
The gospel sends us to the law to frame our way of life.
– Samuel Bolton, The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*

*And heaven have mercy on us all—Presbyterians and Pagans alike—for we are all dreadfully cracked about the head sadly and desperately in need of mending.
– Herman Melville, Moby Dick*



Ask the Lord of the harvest . . .

– *Matthew 9:38*



In which of all the 365 days of the calendar year would you guess that the most long distance calls are placed in the United States? If you guessed Mother’s Day, you are correct. But on what day are the most collect calls made? I’ll bet you were correct again—Father’s Day.

A child makes a call to the father. The father pays. That sounds a lot like prayer. We initiate the contact (or at least we think we do), but we get through at God’s expense. Jesus, our High Priest, has opened access for us to the holy God.

James says, “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (James 5:16). We know this is true, and Satan knows it, too. God calls us to the priestly work of intercessory prayer. Prayer is one of God’s greatest weapons in spiritual warfare. The disciples came to Jesus, asking Him, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). We need to ask Him to teach us as well. We need to be lifelong students in the school of prayer.

Prayer should become our “first resource rather than our last resort.” When we are making plans, we need to ask God to guide and superintend those plans, to overrule our blunders and keep us on the right path.

We can help and encourage one another in prayer, but no one Christian’s prayer life will be an exact pattern for another. God created us as individuals, and each one’s prayers should be his own. I can share something of my own prayer life with you, hoping that these ideas will stimulate you to pray on your own. With that in mind, here are four types of intercessory prayer that I have found effective.

First, I have formed the habit of what I call priestly prayer, praying daily for the people I have responsibility for. These include my family, my places of leadership, several people from places where I’ve ministered in the past, and a few friends.

Secondly, I like to take verses or passages and pray through those. Psalm 25 is one of my favorites. I often pray, “Show me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long,” and continue praying through the psalm. If I am praying for my friend, Joe, I will say, “Show Joe your ways, O Lord, teach him your paths,” and so on. This is a rich and wonderful way to pray, one of God’s means of keeping us on track. Often when we don’t know what to pray for in a given situation, God guides us through His Word.

A third kind of prayer I pray is the “dart prayer.” Satan throws his darts at us through temptation, discouragements, or other devices. We need to throw darts back at him. We need to call out to God, to “submit (ourselves) to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from (us)” (James 4:7).

Another type of prayer I pray frequently is the opportunity prayer. When we see some opportunity for the gospel, some new challenge in ministry, we need to bring it before God’s throne, thanking Him, asking Him for wisdom and open doors, pleading for His grace, and asking His blessing.

Perhaps these ideas will stimulate you in your own prayer closet. No pat formula is best for everyone, but everyone is commanded to pray. Whatever methods or techniques you employ, get busy with the work of intercessory prayer!



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Ephesians 6:10-20

1. *What challenges do you face in your prayer life?*
2. *What practices have helped in the past? Are there prayer practices that you need to renew?*
3. *Be creative. What new practice might you institute to help you “bring your petitions to God with thanksgiving” (Philippians 4:5)?*

*The treasury of grace, although always emptying, is always full;
the key of prayer which opens it is always close at hand; and the Almighty [Giver]
of the blessing of grace is always waiting to be gracious.*

– D.L. Moody, *Sovereign Grace*

*You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you
cannot do more than pray until you’ve prayed.*

– John Bunyan



The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

– Romans 8:16-17



Martin Luther said, “God is mine and everything is mine.”

He had discovered Paul’s teaching that we are “heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ.”

If you are married, you likely have a joint bank account with your spouse. This means, of course, that everything in it belongs to both. It isn’t “fifty percent yours and fifty percent mine.” It’s a hundred percent ours, but it’s also a hundred percent yours and a hundred percent mine.

A husband can go into the bank and deposit a thousand dollars, and his wife can go up to the drive-through window five minutes later and withdraw the entire thousand. Everything in the account is as much hers as it is his.

That is actually the inheritance that God has given us in Jesus Christ; we are joint heirs with God’s Son.

Everything that is His is ours. He gives us His righteousness, His promises, His Spirit, an expectation of eternity in His home. We don’t have anything to bring to the relationship but our sin, our worthlessness, and our need. We need to ask Him to make the realization of our position with Him a reality in our lives.

We see that our whole salvation and all its parts are comprehended in Christ (Acts 4:12). We should therefore take care not to serve the least portion of it from anything else. – John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion



READ, THINK, & PRAY

Romans 8:12-17

1. How do you feel when you hear that everything that belongs to Christ belongs to you? Is it hard to believe? Is it possible to lack something you need in this position with Christ?
2. Thank God for your adoption into His family!

"... Why then is so little advancement made? Are there not some practical mistakes very commonly entertained, which are the cause of this slowness of growth? I think there are, and will endeavour to specify some of them.

First, there is a defect in our belief in the freeness of divine grace. To exercise unshaken confidence in the doctrine of gratuitous pardon is one of the most difficult things in the world and to preach this doctrine fully without verging towards antinomianism is no easy task, and is therefore seldom done. But Christians cannot but be lean and feeble when deprived of their proper nutriment. It is by faith that the spiritual life is made to grow; and the doctrine of free grace, without any mixture of human merit, is the only true object of faith. Christians are too much inclined to depend on themselves, and not to derive their life entirely from Christ. There is a spurious legal religion, which may flourish without the practical belief in the absolute freeness of divine grace, but it possesses none of the characteristics of the Christian's life. It is found to exist in the rankest growth, in systems of religion which are utterly false. But even when the true doctrine is acknowledged in theory, often it is not practically felt and acted on. The new convert lives upon his frames rather than on Christ, while the older Christian is still found struggling in his own strength and, failing in his expectations of success, he becomes discouraged first, and then he sinks into a gloomy despondency, or becomes in a measure careless. At that point the spirit of the world comes in with resistless force. Here, I am persuaded, is the root of the evil; and until religious teachers inculcate clearly, fully, and practically, the grace of God as manifested in the Gospel, we shall have no vigorous growth of piety among professing Christians. We must be, as it were, identified with Christ—crucified with Him, and living by Him, and in Him by faith, or rather, have Christ living in us. The covenant of grace must be more clearly and repeatedly expounded in all its rich plenitude of mercy, and in all its absolute freeness.

Another thing which prevents growth in grace is that Christians do not make their obedience to Christ comprehend every other object of pursuit. Their religion is too much a separate thing, and they pursue their worldly business in another spirit. They try to unite the service of God and Mammon. Their minds are divided, and often distracted with earthly cares and desires which interfere with the service of God; whereas they should have but one object of pursuit, and all that they do and seek be in subordination to this. Everything should be done for God and to God. Whether they eat or drink they should do all to His glory. As the ploughing and sowing of the wicked is sin, because done without regard to God and His glory, so the secular employments and pursuits of the pious should all be consecrated, and become a part of their religion. Thus they would serve God in the field and in the shop, in buying and selling and getting gain—all would be for God. Thus their earthly labours would prove no hindrance to their progress in piety; and possessing an undivided mind, having a single object of pursuit, they could not but grow in grace daily. He whose eye is single shall have his whole body full of light."

– Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience*

One Final Word

I gave my sin more credit than it deserved.

You see, I once was a respected, ordained minister who loved his work. Through years of “successful ministry,” I came to trust in my own ability and gifts. My identity was wrapped completely around my work.

But my world caved in when I gave in to adultery and divorce, which eventually resulted in public disgrace, the loss of my job and my ordination, and excommunication.

Words cannot express the utter despair I felt in my heart and soul after such public humiliation and shame. The loss of respect from my peers, my children’s deep disappointment in me, the loss of a job I loved, the loss of friends I never imagined would abandon me—all of this pushed me further and further into despair.

At times, the despair was so deep that I wondered in the depth of my heart if it would be better to end it all. Though I never took any action, I cannot deny that the thought of it seemed to offer the only escape.

The voice of the evil one was so loud and so convincing that I did not know how to begin to crawl out of the dark. I was convinced that God was so disappointed and angry with me that I could never be forgiven. How could I ever face Him again? I think I have a glimpse of what Peter must have experienced when he saw the face of Christ for the first time after his infamous denial prior to the crucifixion.

I reasoned that if my sin could have such a devastating effect on my life, then it must be quite powerful. So how could I ever be of use to the Lord again?

After six months of these feelings of hopelessness and despair, I finally realized that the only way to survive all that was weighing upon me was to embrace the church’s discipline. I knew I couldn’t run from it and just go to another denomination, living and working as if nothing had happened. I would continue to be miserable.

And so I embraced the discipline with a ray of hope—knowing that while there was no energy left in myself to face the further humiliation that discipline would exact from me, I could finally look upwards to the source of my strength—Jesus Himself, through His Holy Spirit’s work in my life.

The loving, non-judgmental care I received from a special home fellowship group was the instrument God used to restore me to the Lord and His church. As I shared my ugliness, they did not flinch or squirm. They nodded their heads as if to say, “We’ve been there, brother.” For months and months, they refused to allow me to leave without hearing that God’s love was greater than my sin, that I could do nothing to cause Him to love me less. They constantly reminded me of the truth: You are even worse than you think, but God loves you infinitely more than you can imagine!

God spoke to me through their consistent love and untiring willingness to let me process all the junk in my life. I eventually began to believe what they were saying. The screams of the evil one were being drowned out by the whispers of the Holy Spirit reminding me of the depth of God's love for me. Eventually, I believed that God's love was greater than even my sin. God loved me, not because of anything I did or did not do, but because of the work of Christ on the cross. I was acceptable to God because I was in Christ.

Once I could accept the depth of God's love for me, then I had the courage to face my own sin. If I had tried to understand my sin before I understood the love of the Father, it would have crushed me. In fact, I have come to see that it is only in seeing the love of the Father that we see accurately what our sin looks like and the depth of it.

The depth of my sin is still being exposed, but now I don't despair. Rather, there is a sense of peace and joy that comes because I know now, more than ever before, that God's love is greater indeed than all my sin and shame!

All that has happened to bring me to the place of restoration was God's pursuit of me. Of that I am sure. "However real and disastrous may be the power of our evil in troubling the communion of love between us and our Lord . . . never forget that our sin is utterly impotent to turn away the tide, that sets to us from the heart of Christ." (Alexander Maclaren)

This is why I gave my sin too much credit. Though it was grievous to the heart of God and offensive to the church, it was not more powerful than the love of God. How precious to me is His gracious love that would not be turned away by my sin or guilt.

– Name Withheld

Though [Peter's] grasp of Christ had relaxed, Christ's grasp of him had not. He might change, he might cease for a time to prize his Lord's love; he might cease either to be conscious of it or to wish for it. But that love could not change . . . Repelled, it still lingered beside him. Disowned, it still asserted its property in him. Being reviled, it blessed; being persecuted, it endured; being defamed, it entreated; and, patient through all wrongs and changes, it loved on till it had won back the erring heart . . .

However real and disastrous may be the power of our evil in troubling the communion of love between us and our Lord, and in compelling Him to smite before He binds up, never forget that our sin is utterly impotent to turn away the tide, that sets to us from the heart of Christ.

– Alexander Maclaren, *Sermons Preached in Manchester*

Dr. Paul D. Kooistra

Born and raised in Minnesota, Dr. Paul D. Kooistra holds a B.A. in psychology from the University of Minnesota, a M.Div. from Columbia Theological Seminary, and a Ph.D. in educational psychology from the University of Alabama. He served as assistant pastor of Pinelands Presbyterian Church in Miami, Florida (1967–1969), and as associate pastor of Seminole Presbyterian Church in Tampa, Florida (1969–1973), where he was also principal of Seminole Presbyterian Day School during the 1972–73 academic year.



In 1973, Dr. Kooistra assumed the position of assistant professor of Christian Education at Belhaven College in Jackson, Mississippi; he subsequently became associate professor of Christian Education and Homiletics at Reformed Theological Seminary (RTS) in Clinton, Mississippi (1975). In 1985 he accepted the presidency of Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, where he also taught practical theology. He served the seminary until 1994, when he was named coordinator of Mission to the World for the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), where he served until 2014. Dr. Kooistra was elected moderator of the PCA's 36th General Assembly in 2008. Upon his retirement from MTW in 2014, he became president of Erskine College and Seminary, and retired from there in 2016.

Dr. Kooistra has published five devotional books: *31 Days of Grace*; *Following God: His Will for Your Life*; *Supper's Ready*; *Pursuit of Joy*; and *Faith Promise*.

After losing his first wife, Jan, to cancer in 2008, the Lord brought Sandi into Dr. Kooistra's life. They were married August 29, 2009, and reside in Suwanee, Georgia. They have five adult children and seven grandchildren.

What is the Most Wonderful Thing About God?

Some would assert that it is the omnipotence of God. There is no doubt this is important. Anything less would not be much like God.

Others argue it is holiness. Again this is important, and one with a flawed character could hardly be God. I believe, however, that the wonder of the God of the Bible is His love for His people. His love is an eternal love. God began His love affair with His people before anything existed.

This love is the source of strength for God's people. Of the first twelve disciples, only one met a natural death. The rest were persecuted to death in many horrible ways. How did they prevail in the face of such opposition? They knew they had an exclusive claim on the love of God in Christ Jesus.

The reality of God's love for you can make a difference in your life. Jonathan Edwards said that the love and grace of God (the gospel) filtering down into the cracks and crevices of your life both rationally and experientially can change everything.

May God work His wonderful work of grace and love in your life.

In the grace of Christ,
Paul D. Kooistra