

Knowing Who We Are in Christ



2025 Lenten Devotional

Pastor Carol Peters



LA CASA DE CRISTO
LUTHERAN CHURCH
Scottsdale, Arizona



LA CASA DE CRISTO

L U T H E R A N C H U R C H

Lent 2025

Dear La Casa de Cristo Family,

I am so pleased that Pastor Carol Peters once again graces us and our spiritual life by writing our Lenten devotional for 2025, titled Knowing Who We Are in Christ!

This is our Fiftieth Anniversary year as a community of faith and, as we celebrate the past fifty years and look forward to the next fifty, there are two things in this devotional (among many!) that are wise for us to ponder as an entire faith community:

First, we have relationships to cherish, namely, our relationship with Jesus! (Week Two) We also enjoy relationships within the church family. (Week Five) The greatest compliment I ever heard about La Casa de Cristo is that, for a very large church, it feels “small,” a close knit community that cares. Here, for fifty years, sorrows have been divided and joys multiplied. Births, baptisms, weddings, funerals, and so much more bring us together! Fellowship, food, fun, learning, and spiritual growth are all a part of our church life. There are many families here that have two and even three generations of membership. What a blessing it is to have relationships we cherish!

Secondly, we have a mission to accomplish (Week Six). Our mission statement is, “Loving those who don’t know Jesus, and growing those who do!” We have a mission to accomplish here! And while some things may change, i.e., technology, the ways we do outreach or communicate, the basics are still foundational.

Those basics are all found in Matthew 28: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

We continue to nurture our relationships here, and continue to forge forward, knowing we are fulfilling the Great Commission and Great Commandment, to go and tell, and to love each other unconditionally as Jesus Christ loves us.

Thank you, Pastor Carol, for reminding us of who we are and whose we are! We celebrate what has been, rejoice in the present, and anticipate the next fifty years!

In Christ,

Pastor Jeffrey Ruby

INTRODUCTION

My pastor when I was in junior high always reminded us, **“Know who you are and whose you are.”** I am not sure I understood then what he meant, but I certainly do now.

We are inclined to form our identity in any number of ways – family heritage, social status, environment, career, etc. Sometimes circumstances force an identity upon us. Often a self-image is formed by what other people said of us when we were children. Too many negative comments and people can begin, from an early age, to see themselves as unlovable, stupid, inadequate, doomed to fail. On the other hand, one’s upbringing can also leave some people with a sense of entitlement or with narcissistic tendencies that tell them whatever they do is okay and their opinions are always right. Many people feel they have a “healthy” self-image and regard themselves as “good” people – hard-working, kind, generous, “solid” citizens.

For Christians, “whose you are” determines “who you are.” The Lord gives those who are His own a brand new identity. And this God-given identity overrides all the other images we have of ourselves. Or it should! *We are who God says we are!*

Too often, however, we are woefully unaware of just who we are in Christ. Consequently, our lives fall short of the full life Jesus promised (John 10:10). We miss out on the peace and joy He said would be ours (John 14:27; 15:11). We cannot begin to understand the contentment Paul experienced in spite of any circumstances in which he found himself (Philippians 4:11).

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation. The old has gone, the new is here!” (II Corinthians 5:17). **This Lent we will take a look at who we are, our new identity in Christ.** The Bible gives us numerous names and titles by which we now are called, names given to us by the Lord. They are names that describe our new selves (Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10) and our new status. They might be names we have heard most of our lives but have never truly understood. Or perhaps we have decided those names could not possibly describe us.

The key is to see that our new identity is bound up with our relationship to Jesus Christ. The term “in Christ” occurs in Ephesians alone 40 times. We are in Him and He is in us. We are His, and He is the One who makes us new. **It is all about Jesus and it always will be** -- His death for us that brought us peace with God, His grace that blesses us though we do not merit those blessings, His power enabling us to be what we could not be on our own.

Our challenge is to discover who we are in Christ – individually and corporately as a church family. And then to believe and accept what God tells us about our new identity! We cannot allow ignorance or unbelief to keep us from being who we are meant to be! Indeed, *who we already are in Christ!* Together we will learn to grow into the persons and the congregation God created us to be. We’ll learn how to live out our identity in Christ.

May this study open our eyes to the amazing things the Lord has done for us, wants to do for us, and will do in and through us. May we realize more than ever the Lord’s great love for us. And may His love inspire us to love Him more fervently than ever and to live our lives for His glory.

Your sister in Jesus,
Pastor Carol Peters

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Please note that some of the quotations in this devotional do not use inclusive language because they are direct quotes from books, many of which were written before using inclusive language became the norm.

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THE ELECT

Before time began, there was God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, eternally existing together, relating to one another in a way far beyond our understanding. Before time, there was a plan for creation, a divine purpose in the mind of God. We catch glimpses of that in Scripture. God desired a people for Himself -- more specifically, people whom the Father might give to the Son.

God knew that humanity would rebel and fall into sin. Before God said, “Let there be light,” He had already made provision to rescue humanity from sin and death. From the creation of the world, the Son became the Lamb of God who would give His life to save us (I Peter 1:18-20; Revelation 13:8). The Cross was part of the plan from the very beginning (Acts 2:23)! On Good Friday, Jesus, the Son of God, “gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself **a people that are His very own**” (Titus 2:14), conformed to His image (Romans 8:29).

What is truly incredible is that, according to Ephesians 1:4, **God already chose the people whom He would save before there were any people at all! These people are “the elect,” the people “chosen” by God to have faith in Christ and become His own.** Jesus once affirmed, “All those the Father gives Me will come to Me” (John 6:37), and noted that no one can come to Him unless the Father enables them to come (John 6:44, 65). In John 17, Jesus repeatedly prayed for those whom the Father had given to Him. Jesus Himself referred to “the elect” (e.g. Matthew 24:22, 31). The Greek word *eklektos* is translated as both elect and chosen in the New Testament, and numerous passages describe Christians as “chosen,” (e.g., I Peter 2:9; Revelation 17:14).

It is appropriate to begin our study with “the elect” because our election predates creation! It is also risky to start here because the “doctrine of election” confuses most people and angers others. [That is because it raises the issue of predestination. See Appendix A.]

For Christians to realize that they were chosen by God long before they were born, that we were already in the mind and heart of the Lord, is a great assurance. **Our status before God is settled. Our position in Christ is secure. Who we are rests on God’s choice, on His eternal decree** – and not on our changing feelings. Jesus, speaking of His sheep, assured us, “My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of My Father’s hand” (John 10:29). Our doubts and temptations, the weakness of our faith – nothing can pull us away from Him.

We, of course, cannot determine who is chosen and who is not. Each of us can make sure that we are among the chosen – as we will see in future devotions -- but we can never decide who is not. The very vocal atheist or the worst of sinners might yet come to faith in Jesus Christ.

There is no room for pride. God did not choose us because He saw something worthy in us. God’s choice was made before we did anything good or bad (Romans 9:10-24). So, we might ask, “Why me?” but God does not give us a reason other than His sovereign grace! God is sovereign and can do as He chooses. God’s choice of those on whom He would bestow His grace is not arbitrary – God does not act in that way. **God’s choice of you and me was deliberate**, but we are not privy to the Lord’s reasoning. We can simply receive His grace and His gift and be very, very grateful!

Sovereign God, I – unworthy as I am -- feel humbled and grateful to be among Your elect.

BELIEVERS

“Believers” was a name used for Christians from the beginning. Acts 2:44 mentions “the believers” in Jerusalem. Paul commented on “the believers” – literally, “the believing ones” – in Macedonia (I Thessalonians 1:7). Timothy was to be an example to “the believers” (I Timothy 4:12).

The word used for believing and having faith is the same Greek verb: *pisteuō*. It is much more than intellectual belief or the holding of an opinion. It means placing confidence in, relying upon, fully trusting the object of one’s faith (usually a person rather than a thing or a creed). It is not set in opposition to reason nor does it refer to believing what we cannot prove. When the jailer at Philippi asked Paul and Silas, “What must I do to be saved?” they replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:30-31). John 3:16-18 gives us that same message.

Believers are all those who acknowledge that Jesus is Lord and trust that He has rescued us from sin, death, and the devil. Accordingly, believers *rely on Him* as their Savior, *submit to His word*, want to *obey His will*, and are understandably *devoted to Him*.

In Luther’s *Small Catechism*, we read that it is the Holy Spirit who *calls* us to believe in Jesus Christ. At some point in life, we become aware that our lives do not measure up. We might experience guilt. And we are all guilty! We are all sinners. We might deny, minimize, or rationalize our guilt, but on our own, we cannot be rid of it. Perhaps we recognize an emptiness within that nothing can fill. **Those are signs that the Holy Spirit is calling us to believe in Jesus.** That call might come to us in any number of different ways, but somehow, we realize the need for “something” more or different in life. The Holy Spirit helps us to see that what we need is Jesus.

Christians are often described as “called” – “called to belong to Jesus Christ” (Romans 1:6). It is a summons, a command, not merely an invitation, but the choice of how to respond is our own. Each one of us must decide. Strangely enough, it is when we respond and give our “Yes” to faith in Christ, that we begin to realize God Himself enabled us to make that choice. Without His grace, we could not believe. We choose Christ and find that He had already chosen us (John 15:16).

Election and believing go together in a way we cannot understand – like opposite sides of the same coin. Our belief is essential. God does not violate the free will He has given us. God chose us, but for our part, we still need to come to Him in faith. To the question, “When were you saved?” Bible scholar Warren Wiersbe gave three answers: when the Father chose you, when the Son gave His life for you, and when you said “Yes” to the Holy Spirit’s call and became a believer.¹

All the various names in this study depend on one’s being a believer – not merely a church member. Without personal faith in Jesus Christ, these titles and names simply do not apply to us. Believing does not “earn” us those names, but faith in Jesus – even a weak faith – is needed to receive them. God’s Word says, **“Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves” (II Corinthians 13:5).** **This is a good time to do that very thing!** Ask yourself “What does it mean *for me* to say, ‘I believe in Jesus Christ?’” If you have never done so before, today is a good time to answer the Spirit’s call and become a believer! Put your trust in Jesus!

Thank You, Holy Spirit, for calling me to believe in Jesus Christ and for enabling me to do so.

A NEW CREATION

Christianity is not a self-improvement program. The Lord is not merely reforming us. Rather, God has made us *totally new*. **“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation.** The old has gone, the new is here!” (II Corinthians 5:17). A “new creation” means that believers are the products of a creative act of God, “‘new’ as to form or quality, of a different nature” from what we were before.² The Bible calls this “new birth” or “regeneration” (I Peter 1:3).

Jesus told Nicodemus that to enter the Kingdom of God, one must be born again. [Literally, the Greek is “born from above.”] Nicodemus, thinking in terms of physical birth, did not understand. Jesus pointed out to Nicodemus that He was speaking of *spiritual* birth: “Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit” (John 3:6). It is supernatural birth.

The “seed” that generates spiritual birth is the Word of God (I Peter 1:23), planted in our hearts. Along with the Word, the power of the Holy Spirit conceives new life within us. As Jesus pointed out, “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you – they are full of the Spirit and life” (John 6:63). By the Spirit’s work, we who once were spiritually dead are now alive to God (Ephesians 2:4-5)! We can’t explain how that happens any more than we can account for the wind’s coming and going (John 3:8). We are born again!

The implications of our new birth are staggering! This devotional study of our identity in Christ will explore those implications, but here is a short list to start us off:

We are clean! We are cleansed by the blood of Jesus (I John 1:7) and by “the washing of rebirth” (Titus 3:5). We are forgiven (Ephesians 1:7)! Guilt and shame belong to the past, no longer a part of our lives (Psalm 103:12). Now, when we do sin, these sins are covered as well (I John 2:1-2).

We are saved! “Salvation” encompasses *all* of the blessings God bestows upon us.³ Here are only a few of them – God brings us through dangers and difficulties. God extends healing to us. God provides for our needs. God spares us from judgment and grants us eternal life.

We are accepted! God has welcomed us into His family. No need to prove ourselves. No need to try to earn God’s favor. No need to hide “the real me.” We are loved.

We are free! “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free” (Galatians 5:1). Countless things can enslave us: jealousy, fear, pornography, sugar, money, ambition, alcohol, etc. etc. To be a new creation means the Lord has broken the chains of *every single thing* that kept us in bondage. Now He calls us to live in that new liberty.

We are spiritually alive! Things to which unbelievers give no thought take on new significance. Learning the will of God is now important to us. We desire to please not ourselves but the Lord.

**Believer in Christ! You are a new creation! Born anew! Born from above!
Start seeing yourself as the Lord sees you!**

Lord, open my eyes to see and my mind to understand the new reality that describes me!

CHILDREN OF GOD

Two different words describe our relationship to God as our Father. The first is *tekna*, the word for “children,” referring to offspring. John 1:12 tells us we are the *tekna* of God. We have been given new birth, having been born of God (John 1:13). The other word is *huios*, meaning a son. Irrespective of gender, it was used of an adult child, emphasizing “the dignity and character of the relationship.”⁴ It was a Roman legal title for both one’s offspring and one’s adopted children.

Although our culture tells us all people everywhere are children of God, the Bible definitely does not teach this. All people are *created by God*, and we are called to see all people everywhere as *our neighbors* and to love them. But only those who are born from above are *children* of God. To be a child of God is an incredible blessing! “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children [*tekna*] of God! And that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1).

The most important thing we can know about ourselves is that we are the children of God.⁵ As strange as it might seem, our ethnicity, gender, and social standing are not as important to our identity as the fact that we are children of God with equal standing before Him (Galatians 3:28). To realize – beyond any doubt – that God is our Father deeply impacts our lives at every level. For one thing, a child of Almighty God certainly never need feel insignificant! Moreover, when we are *born* into His family, we cannot ever lose that relationship. It is our identity for eternity!

In the Sermon on the Mount, **Jesus assured us of God’s fatherly care**, teaching us not to worry about our lives because our heavenly Father knows our needs (Matthew 6:25-34). He went on to say that even earthly parents know how to give good gifts to their children, so “*how much more* will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him!” (Matthew 7:11).

As God’s children, we can share an intimacy with our Father. We can come into His presence with confidence (Hebrews 4:16). We can come near to Him, and He has promised to come near to us (James 4:8). As the Father loves Jesus, He also loves us (John 17:23)! God is our “Abba Father” – meaning Daddy (Romans 8:15)! We can bring our requests to Him; He hears us because He loves us (John 16:23-27). Are we availing ourselves of such an awesome privilege? If not, why not?!

Not only are we God’s children by spiritual birth, **we are also adopted “sons” of God.** Under Roman law, the adoption process was initiated by the father, often to secure an heir. The adoptee was an adult who entered the relationship willingly, severing all former relationships. The adoptee received the status of a “son” – *huios* – of the new father with full rights and privileges, including those of an heir (Romans 8:14-17; Galatians 4:1-7). ***We have become joint heirs with Jesus Christ Himself!*** [We will look at that relationship in Week Three’s devotions.]

Do we always feel like a child of God? Probably not. Do we always behave like a child of God? Definitely not. But we must not look to our emotions or our experiences to confirm that we are children of God. That assurance comes mainly from Scripture. God has promised that to those who receive Jesus, who believe in Him, He gives the right to become children of God (John 1:12).

Take the Lord at His Word! God’s Word is truth (John 17:17).

Father, for Your love, for Your care, for joyful access into Your presence, I am Your grateful child!

GOD'S TREASURED POSSESSION

Although everything that is created belongs to God because He created it, there is a unique way in which believers belong to Him. **The Lord bought us.** “You are not your own; you were bought at a price” (I Corinthians 6:19-20; 7:23). The Greek word translated “bought” is from *agorazō*, meaning to do business at the market place, the *agora*.⁶ Because of the price the Lord paid, because He did not need us but wanted us, we are a very “treasured” or “special” possession of His (I Peter 2:9).

That price was high indeed! The Lord did not pay the price with silver or gold, “but with the precious blood of Christ” (I Peter 1:18-19). Scripture sometimes uses the picture of “redemption” to illustrate this. Slaves, for example, could be “redeemed” if a close relative would pay a given amount to secure their freedom (Leviticus 25:47-49). With respect to the payment made on the Cross, asking to whom payment was made is immaterial. Our police sometimes pay a high price to secure our safety, but they do not pay it to anyone. The focus is on what it cost them personally in terms of injury or death. Likewise, the focus of God’s purchase is on *the price* Jesus paid.

From the time we were young children, we learned to put our names on things that belonged to us to protect what was ours. The Lord does something similar with us. “When you believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit...” (Ephesians 1:13). The Lord “set His seal of ownership on us, and put His Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (II Corinthians 1:22).

In the 1st century, one’s signet ring bore one’s mark and had legal significance. Wax was placed on one’s possessions, and the ring was pressed into the wax, forming a seal that indicated ownership. It could also be made on documents to authenticate their content and the authority of the issuer.

The Bible tells us that God gives the gift of the Holy Spirit to each and every believer. The Holy Spirit within us is the seal of God’s ownership. We are God’s possession, His people. Moreover, the Lord will protect what belongs to Him. Jesus once said that the thief comes to steal, but no one and nothing can snatch us from His hands (John 10:10, 28) – not even the weakness of our faith! Our identity in Christ is secure! It cannot be stolen! In addition, the Spirit is like a deposit, a guarantee that God will give us all that He has promised, including eternal life with Him forever.

The presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives assures us that we really do in fact belong to God. How can we be sure of the Holy Spirit’s presence within us? If we are led by the Spirit, then we do know the Spirit is within (Romans 8:14). The Holy Spirit leads us to desire to please the Lord. Titus 2:14 tells us that when we belong to Jesus, we will be “eager to do what is good.” The Spirit within prompts that eagerness. The Lutheran *Formula of Concord* asserts, “Good works are evidences of [the Spirit’s] presence and indwelling.”⁷ On the other hand, “if we are indifferent or hostile toward the things of God, we cannot assume that we are in His family.”⁸

Do not fear that you are not doing enough! Theologian R. C. Sproul explained that ***any sense at all in which our spirits are inclined to the things of Christ “guarantees that we are indwelt by the Spirit of God. The flesh never is inclined whatsoever to the things of God.”*** [Emphases added.]⁹

Holy Spirit, have Your way with me so that my life will reflect the Lord to whom I belong!

ABRAHAM'S OFFSPRING

One of the more difficult experiences in life is that of being left out. You didn't make the team. The college that was your first choice rejected you. You weren't invited to the party. As Gentiles, that was our situation before God: "you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise..." (Ephesians 2:12). We were left out.

When the Gospel first reached the Gentiles and they began responding in faith, there was some question as to how they could be included in the community of God's people if they did not first become Jews! Some Jewish Christians, called Judaizers, insisted that all Gentile converts follow the Law of Moses, especially with respect to circumcision. Paul's letter to the Galatians addressed that issue, as did the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15).

In that context, Paul fully expounded the message that would become so important to Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation: justification by faith. [To be justified means that we are declared righteous in God's sight; we are not condemned.] Paul's chief example was the Patriarch Abraham, and his key verse was Genesis 15:6. After the Lord had made extraordinary promises to him, "Abram believed the LORD, and He credited it to him as righteousness."

Paul pointed out that it was not circumcision that made Abraham righteous; circumcision had not yet been instituted. Nor was Abraham righteous because he followed the Law. Abraham lived centuries before God gave the Law (Exodus 20). **Abraham was declared righteous because he believed. He believed that God was able to keep His promise and would be faithful to do so.**

Abraham is "the father of all who believe" whether circumcised or not; those "who have the faith of Abraham" are his "offspring" (Romans 4:11, 16). We are left out no longer! "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29).

The Law, the prophets, the covenants, the promises of God, the lineage of the Messiah – all these belong to Israel (Romans 9:3-5), pictured as an olive tree in Romans 11. The roots of the tree are the Patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Gentile believers are the uncultivated branch that has been grafted onto the tree. While the Jews who have rejected their Messiah are now the branch broken off, eventually they will be grafted back on (Romans 11:23; Zechariah 12:10).

This is the "mystery" of God's plan now made clear (Ephesians 1:9; 2:6, 9) – not simply that the Lord extended salvation to the Gentiles as that had been prophesied by Isaiah. The surprising thing was that **the Gentiles are now equal with the Jews, accepted by God on the very same basis, namely faith in Jesus Christ. We are all fellow-citizens (Ephesians 2:19) and members of one body (Ephesians 3:6). There is no longer a wall dividing Jew from Gentile (Ephesians 2:14).**

Nevertheless, the "roots" support the Gentile branch and not vice versa (Romans 11:18). Jesus, too, reminds us that "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22). Antisemitism has absolutely no place in the Church. Instead, we owe the Jews a debt of gratitude and as needed, our support (Romans 15:27). All peoples on earth have indeed been blessed through Abraham (Genesis 12:3)!

God of Abraham, how blessed I am to be included and granted such a rich spiritual heritage.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION AND/OR PERSONAL REFLECTION

If you are reading this devotional study as part of a weekly discussion group, whether face-to-face or online, the general outline for each week's discussion session applies to you. *(Any questions in italics are for personal reflection, not for group sharing.)* **There are probably more questions than your group will have time to cover each week. Don't become frustrated!** Choose the ones you want to discuss and save the rest to cover if you have enough time.

If you are reading this devotional study on your own, without participating in a group, the discussion questions can also be used for personal reflection. In that case, use the discussion guides to reflect on the question(s) listed for each day's reading. You might want to journal your answers.

In either case, start your discussions or reflection time with prayer for the insight only the Holy Spirit can give into God's Word and into our own hearts and minds.

Open in prayer

Get acquainted time Introduce yourselves to one another with 1) your name, 2) your family situation, and 3) one of your favorite places where you have lived or visited. Be brief!

The members of my group are:

Group discussion/Personal reflection questions

1. Which one of this week's six devotions caught your interest the most? Why that one?
2. Day 1. To be "chosen" for the job, for a role in the play, for a position on the team – all stir up good feelings. What words describe your feelings on being "chosen by God"? See how many different words your group can come up with.
3. Day 1. John Koessler observed (page 52), "Whether or not we admit it, we secretly believe that everyone gets pretty much what they deserve. So when we read that we have been chosen by God, we naturally conclude that somewhere along the way we must have done something to deserve being chosen." How would you respond to that?

4. Day 2. "Faith" in the Bible is generally a verb, not a noun. What is the significance of that?
5. Day 2. *Think through your own faith journey. Do you remember a time when you first stopped using memorized prayers or the "God bless mommy and daddy" prayers and truly spoke with the Lord about a need of yours or of someone else? Try remembering when you first truly trusted Jesus on your own. And thank the Holy Spirit for calling you to believe.*
6. Day 2. Someone once said, "God has no grandchildren." II Corinthians 13:5 says to examine yourselves to see if we are in the faith. It says "test yourselves." II Peter 1:10 tells us to "make every effort to confirm your calling and election." How do we test ourselves? What indications should we look for?
7. Day 3. Everyone who trusts Jesus as one's Savior and Lord is born again whether or not we can pinpoint a date. What for you is an especially meaningful result of your being born again? (See the list on the bottom half of Day 3's devotion.)
8. Day 4. *How comfortable are you with God as your Father? How easily can you approach Him? Is He "Abba Father" – "Daddy" – to you? Or is your relationship with Him more formal? Take a few moments to talk with Him about your feelings.*
9. Day 4. Do you agree with Neil Anderson's comment that the *most* important thing we can know about ourselves is that we are children of God? Why or why not?
10. Day 4. Why did Jesus insist that we not worry? What has helped you to overcome worry?
11. Day 5. C. Orville McLeish wrote (page 48), "God has put great value on us...sometimes even more than we place on ourselves." In what sense might that be true? Or is it?
12. Day 5. What practical implications for daily life do you see in our having been "bought at a price" and consequently, belonging to the Lord (I Corinthians 6:20)?
13. Day 6. What can we do individually and as a church community to fight antisemitism?
14. Why is it so important to gain our sense of identity from who we are in Christ?
15. *What is one thing you think the Lord wants you to learn and apply to your life as a result of reading of your new identity?*

Prayer requests Share with the group any needs for which you would like the members of the group to pray during the week. Make brief notes below on the requests shared so that you will remember them.

Close in prayer Ask the Lord to bless your group with a deeper knowledge of all He has done for us and of who we are as a result. Pray for your group that friendships will grow and deepen.

“IN CHRIST”

“You are in Me,” Jesus told His disciples, “and I am in you” (John 14:20). Preacher J. Vernon McGee claims that verse “is the most profound statement in the Gospel of John or in the whole Bible,” words so profound that “no philosopher can plumb the depths of their meaning.”¹⁰ The believer’s union with Christ is a major theme in the New Testament where the phrase “in Christ” occurs some 160 times. Fuller Seminary professor Lewis Smedes explained, **“Being in Christ is not only the fundamental fact of the individual Christian’s existence, it is the whole new reality. It is not a side issue of Christian life. It is the new life.”**¹¹

We are new creations *in Christ* (II Corinthians 5:17). We are sanctified *in Christ* (I Corinthians 1:2). Those *in Christ* are not condemned (Romans 8:1). *In Christ*, we have peace (Philippians 4:7). *In Christ*, even though we will die, we will be made alive (I Corinthians 15:22). In fact, we have been gifted “with every spiritual blessing *in Christ*” (Ephesians 1:3).

This is not a mystical union in which we “lose ourselves in the divine” like a raindrop loses itself in the ocean, an idea we find in eastern religions. Yet to be in Christ is certainly a relationship much closer than perhaps we have understood. Indeed, **the New Testament makes it clear that to be in Christ is to be truly linked to Him, joined to Him in some way so completely that where Jesus is, we are there *with Him*, and what is true of Christ is also true of us.** [We will look at what that means in the following two devotions.]

The New Testament provides illustrations that give us insight into our union with Christ. In Ephesians 4:15-16, the Church is the Body of Christ and Jesus is the Head. Ephesians 5:25-32 pictures Christ as the Bridegroom and the Church as the Bride. Jesus spoke of Himself as the Vine and believers as the branches (John 15). We are told to “clothe” ourselves with Christ (Romans 13:14) -- or as some versions read, “put on” Christ, as we would dress ourselves in our clothes. When God looks at the believer, He sees us clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

Another way of understanding life *in Christ* is to view it situationally. Most of us grew up *in* a family that gave us our identity and values, and as we made friends, we came to realize each family has its own traditions and ways of doing things. Likewise, being *in Christ* gives believers their identity and values, setting us apart from the culture around us (John 17:14).

In Christ also refers to living in His Kingdom. While we once followed the dictates of our own wills, we now follow the lead of our King Jesus. We are His subjects, no longer slaves to our own whims or to the kingdom of darkness in which we once lived (Colossians 1:13). Now we are free *in Christ!*

While we cannot truly understand how this union between Christ and the believer can be, being in Christ promises us that Christian life is not *remembering* a historical person, Jesus, who lived two millennia ago. It is not a matter of trying to follow a particular philosophy of life to which we are attracted. Far from it! **We can know and experience Jesus today, and not simply in occasional spiritual “mountain top” experiences, but moment by moment in our everyday lives.** Through the Holy Spirit’s presence in our lives, Jesus is closer to us than anyone else can be.

Father, help me to understand what being so closely joined to Your Son means to me in my life.

“WITH CHRIST”

The Apostle Paul made an incredible claim: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live...” (Galatians 2:20); the Greek literally reads, “With Christ I have been co-crucified.”¹² While that sounds absurd, he explained in Romans 6 that *every believer* in Christ can say the same thing.

In baptism, we were joined to Jesus Christ. We were baptized “into Christ” (Galatians 3:27). Baptism is the sign of our identifying with Jesus Christ, a reminder of our union with Him, the fact that we are now “in Him.” Because we are in Christ, we are with Him not only now and in the future, but we have been joined to Him in His past actions on our behalf. Romans 6 teaches us that when Jesus died on Calvary, we were *with Him*. We were crucified and died with Jesus (v.6).

Romans 6:3 explains that we were *baptized into Christ’s death*. Baptism by immersion, going under the water, illustrates our death and burial. It is also our resurrection as we emerge from the water. “We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead...we too may live a new life” (Romans 6:4). **“Our bond with Jesus is so intimate, so close that in God’s sight we died with Jesus on Calvary, and when Jesus was raised from the dead to new life, we were raised with Him.”**¹³ Colossians 3:1-3 also affirms that we have died and “have been raised with Christ” already. *Past tense!* We have new life now!

It is our “old” nature – the distorted one we were born with – that died with Him. Jesus died for us, *for our sins*, paying the penalty we owed. He also “died *to sin*” (Romans 6:10), meaning He broke sin’s power. In that sense, we died *with Him*, and sin obviously has no control over one who is dead. Romans 6:6 assures us that our old nature has been “done away with.” That does not mean it was totally destroyed, and in fact, we do still sin. The Greek word translated “done away with” actually means “rendered powerless.” Theologian R.C Sproul observes that while the old man is no longer in control, he “keeps kicking and screaming.”¹⁴ The old nature still seeks to exert influence over us, but now we can choose to resist. The “old me” is no longer my true self.

Christ is now at the right hand of the Father, and God’s Word tells us that we are *right now* seated *with Christ* in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 2:6)! Because we are in Christ and *with Him*, there is a sense in which **we are “living above it all”** even as we endure trials and troubles in our daily lives on earth! [We will examine that more fully in Week Three.]

Meanwhile, given the reality of our being with Christ in His death and resurrection, how can we live in the power of that “resurrection life”? Romans 6 gives us three steps:

- 1) “Know” (vv. 3, 6, 9) what Jesus has done for us.** “Grasp what union with Jesus means.”¹⁵ Know who you really are in Christ! “If Satan can keep a Christian ignorant, he can keep him impotent.”¹⁶
- 2) “Count” (v.11) on the truth of God’s Word when it says we died.** “Reckon” yourselves dead to sin (King James Version). Believe it, accept it – even if you do not understand it or feel it. Don’t try to achieve it on your own. It’s already been done! Trust God to make it real in your experience.
- 3) “Offer” (v.13) yourself to God.** Some Bibles say, “Yield...” Do what you know to be the will of God. When we “step out in faith, act on what we know is right, Christ’s power will lift us beyond ourselves...”¹⁷ The faith is ours, but the power is His!

Lord, I believe Your Word! The “old me” is no longer the real me, and it will not control me!

BRANCHES OF THE VINE – “CHRIST IN ME”

After Paul made the claim, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live,” he went on to say, “but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God...” (Galatians 2:20). Paul obviously had not ceased living on earth, but instead his life was endowed with a new power. Jesus Christ lived in him! **Jesus Christ lives within each believer!**

Jesus had assured His disciples that “you are in Me, and I am in you” (John 14:20). Using the metaphor of the vine, Jesus described our union with Him: He is the vine and we are the branches (John 15:5). **A branch connected to the vine receives all the nourishment it needs to produce fruit -- as long as it remains connected to the vine. The key word is “remain,”** and it appears ten times in John 15. “Remain in Me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me” (verse 4).

The life of Jesus within us is transforming us. The old corrupt nature of each believer has been done away with (Romans 6:6), but God has not left us on our own to try to live out the new life we have been given. As Jesus asserted, “Apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). The Holy Spirit – the Spirit of Christ Himself – lives within us (Romans 8:9). As has been said, Christian life is not an attempt to *imitate* Jesus Christ but rather to *participate in His life*.¹⁸ [See Appendix B.]

Because of our union with Christ, fruit is produced in our lives. Jesus did not define what He meant by “fruit,” but surely it includes good works done for others and the fruit mentioned in Galatians 5: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – qualities that glorify God and make Christ real to others.¹⁹ In addition, we can expect to see our prayers answered (John 15:7)! This is because the closer we remain united to Jesus, the more likely it is that our requests will be in harmony with His will.

Jesus commanded us to remain in Him. That means being very intentional about maintaining the closeness of our relationship with Jesus. We are *not* commanded to produce fruit by our own effort, but we *are* commanded to remain connected to the vine. That means, of course, time spent with the Lord in prayer, in the study of His Word, in worship, and in service to others. It also means drawing close to Him in fellowship with other believers in whom He also lives and being careful about obtaining our sustenance from Jesus, the Vine, and not from other sources.

Jesus also told us that to remain in His love, **we need to obey His commands** (John 15:10). Clearly willful disobedience will weaken our connection with Him. Jesus warned that the Father will cut off the unfruitful branch (John 15:2, 6). This does not mean God will send that “branch” to hell, but He will discipline that person. The unfruitful will receive no reward (I Corinthians 3:11-15).

The Father “prunes” all who are fruitful because He loves us and wants us to produce even more fruit (John 15:3). **“Your heavenly Father is never nearer to you than when He is pruning you....**It can mean cutting away the good and the better so that we might enjoy the best.”²⁰ Pruning is not punishment! While unpleasant, it is part of our life in Christ to keep His life flowing in us and through us! As Jesus said, “This is to My Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit” (John 15:8).

Father, may the life of Jesus in me produce much fruit for Your glory!

THE GOOD SHEPHERD'S SHEEP

The metaphor of the shepherd and his sheep is another illustration of the believers' close relationship to Jesus Christ who proclaimed, "I am the Good Shepherd" (John 10:11).

In Jesus' day, a town might have one large, central sheep pen where the local shepherds all brought their flocks, and a gatekeeper guarded them overnight. In the morning, each shepherd called his own sheep and recognizing the voice of their shepherd, they followed him out, and he would lead them to pasture. Flocks were not large, and shepherds often gave names to each of their sheep and spoke or sang to them during the day so that they would know his voice well. Except for the flocks owned by the Temple, sheep were not raised for slaughter but for their wool.

The sheep knew their shepherd and the shepherd knew each of his own sheep. Likewise, Jesus affirms, "I know My sheep" (John 10:14) – not only our names, but our personal needs, our unique personalities, what we can and can't do. **Jesus knows how to deal with each of us individually.**

Jesus emphasized that **His sheep know His voice and listen to His voice** (vv. 3, 4, 16, 27). The Lord, our Shepherd, still speaks to His sheep today. He speaks to us objectively through the Bible – timeless truth, principles not open for debate. The Lord also speaks to us subjectively – maybe through a sermon, a movie, a friend, a hymn, a dream, a book, or in any way He chooses. A word or an idea arrests our attention and holds it. At those times, we need to consider that the Lord *might* be speaking to us – to encourage us, challenge us, guide us, correct us.

His Spirit can speak to us through our thoughts or an inner voice. Often we can discern His voice in a thought that comes suddenly into one's mind, fully formed, and yet it did not come through one's own reasoning or thought processes. Dallas Willard in *Hearing God* wrote that in learning to recognize our Shepherd's voice, we can ask ourselves, "Did that thought make a forceful impact on me? Is it something I will remember?" We can also ask, "Did it sound like something God would say? Is it true to the character of Jesus? Is it biblical?" (The Lord will never contradict His own Word.)²¹ **As we mature in Christ, we become more adept at recognizing His voice.**

Jesus also assured us of our security as His sheep (John 10:11, 28). He promises us eternal life, a promise He can make because He is God and because He gave His life to save His sheep from judgment and death. We might wander off occasionally, but our Shepherd will find us. We will never perish! Moreover, our Shepherd makes sure nothing will steal us away from Him –
not that our grip on Jesus is so strong, but that He has a firm grip on us!

As sheep of the Good Shepherd, we can know His gift of life "to the full," the "abundant life" (King James Version). This does not mean a trouble-free life of prosperity but one in which we can receive God's provisions, know the joy of serving Him, and experience life lived in His presence.²²

Jesus noted that His sheep were given to Him by the Father (John 10:29). R. C. Sproul observed, **"The ultimate blessing the Father gives to any human being is the blessing of being His gift to the Son."**²³ How blessed we are to be sheep, given by God the Father to the Good Shepherd, Jesus!

Lord Jesus, my Shepherd, I am indeed blessed to be one of Your sheep!

DISCIPLES OF JESUS

In the time of Jesus, various rabbis attracted students or disciples, but they did not study in a classroom. A disciple followed his rabbi, going where he went, listening to him and learning from him. Disciples lived with their teachers, like apprentices. They memorized their rabbi's teachings, obeyed his commands, submitted to his authority, and they practiced doing what he did.

Besides the twelve disciples who followed Jesus, later designated "apostles," the term "disciple" also applied to many more who believed in Him (e.g., Luke 6:17). [Jesus often warned would-be disciples of *the cost* of discipleship, which we'll cover in Week Four.] In Acts, those who believed in Jesus were called disciples, e.g. "The *disciples* were called Christians first at Antioch" (Acts 11:26). We can assume most of those disciples had not met Jesus during His years on earth, but like us, came to believe through the testimony of others and the witness of the Holy Spirit.

What did it mean for them to be disciples of Jesus? What does it mean for us?

The Greek word "disciple" (*mathētēs*) meant student or learner, so our discipleship certainly involves studying and learning. Jesus promised us that, after He returned to the Father, the Holy Spirit would come and "will teach you all things" (John 14:26). In addition to the Holy Spirit, we have the Bible. Two awesome gifts from the Lord to us! Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as we read the Gospels, we can hear Jesus speak His sermons and parables to us. We can see His reliance on His Father, and we can watch Him interact with people. *We can be Jesus' disciples!*

Jesus said that those who "hold to My teaching" are "really My disciples" (John 8:31). To that end, **a disciple sets apart sufficient time, not simply to read, but to diligently study the Bible, to know what it says and to understand and apply its message.** To help us in that regard, God has given to the Church "...pastors and teachers to equip His people..." (Ephesians 4:11-12). Sermons and Bible study groups and classes assist us. Many Christians today are biblically illiterate. A disciple is not.

The Apostle Paul noted that he taught everyone so that he might "present everyone fully mature in Christ" (Colossians 1:28). What is it to be "fully mature"? The goal of discipleship was and is that students would be like their teacher (Matthew 10:25), in other words, to be like Jesus. Like the twelve disciples, we learn to follow Jesus' example, to learn and practice His values. Indeed, **God's goal from the very beginning has been that we become like Jesus! Before we were born, God "predestined [us] to be conformed to the image of His Son"** (Romans 8:29).

James 1:22-25 symbolizes God's Word as a mirror. Keeping that in mind, we read, "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory..." (II Corinthians 3:18 NKJV). Warren Wiersbe wrote, "**This verse...presents a truth so exciting that I marvel so many believers have missed it – or ignored it. You and I can share the image of Jesus Christ...As we look into God's Word and see God's Son, the Spirit transforms us...**"²⁴ Here the word "transforms" (*metamorphoō*) means gradually changed from the inside out. As disciples, we are becoming more like our Teacher! What an incentive that is for digging into the Word of God and making it foundational to our lives!!

Father, thank You for the gifts of Your Spirit and Scripture so that I too might be Jesus' disciple!

FRIENDS OF JESUS

The night before His death, Jesus gave His disciples a new name. They had been with Him by that time for three years as His students and as His servants. Then at the Last Supper, Jesus announced, “I no longer call you servants...Instead, I have called you friends...” (John 15:15). We are so accustomed to singing “What a Friend We Have in Jesus” that we forget how incredible Jesus’ declaration of friendship truly is! In all the Old Testament, the only person God called “friend” was Abraham (Isaiah 41:8; James 2:23), although God granted Moses the privilege of speaking with Him as one speaks with a friend (Exodus 33:11).

Friends enjoy each other’s company and like spending time together. Friends understand one another and confide in one another. Friends give of themselves to each other. In fact, Jesus said the highest display of love and friendship is to give one’s life for one’s friends as He did for us (John 15:13). And that is the relationship Jesus desires to have with us. Cultivating friendship, however, takes time. **Are we willing to take the time?**

God displayed His feelings of friendship for Abraham when He said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?” (Genesis 18:17), and then the Lord revealed His plans to Abraham. Jesus displayed His friendship with His disciples in a similar way: “I have called you friends for everything that I learned from My Father, I have made known to you” (John 15:15). **One of the greatest blessings of friendship with Jesus is getting to know Him and God the Father more fully. To His intimate friends, the Lord bestows insight into His ways and reveals His will.**

Believers enjoy different levels of intimacy with Jesus. Peter, John, and James were the “inner circle” among the twelve disciples while John experienced the closest friendship with Jesus. He was “the one Jesus loved” (John 20:2). **“Each of us is as close to God as we choose to be.”**²⁵ When Jesus was teaching in Jerusalem, He chose to spend the nights with friends two miles away (Mark 11:11; John 11:1-3). J. Vernon McGee pointed out, **“Those who want Him, who love Him, are the ones He fellowships with in our day. My friend, you can have Him if you want Him.”**²⁶

There is an “if” in this friendship: “You are My friends if you do what I command” and “If you keep My commands, you will remain in My love” (John 15:10, 14). Jesus apparently is stating a fact rather than making His friendship conditional. As He said earlier, “Whoever has My commands and keeps them is the one who loves Me” and “Anyone who loves Me will obey My teaching” (John 14:21, 23). **Love, friendship, and obedience go together in our relationship with Jesus.** Although choosing to disobey the Lord in some area of our lives will not end our relationship with Him, it makes enjoying fellowship with Him impossible until we repent. Nor can we be friends with the world and friends with Jesus at the same time (James 4:4)!

Jesus is our best friend, but He is still our Lord! In Greek, the word used in John 15 for “friends” can refer to the royal court of a king, the king’s inner circle who have his ear.²⁷ They enjoy his friendship and yet they remain his subjects. While Jesus is our friend in whom we can always confide, and while the love He has for us is like that of a husband for his bride (Ephesians 5:25-32), we are not equals. Jesus is not my “buddy” – He is my Savior, my Friend, my Lord and my God.

Lord Jesus, I would not presume to call You my Friend had You not first called me Your friend!

WEEK TWO

A RELATIONSHIP TO CHERISH

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION AND/OR PERSONAL REFLECTION

Open in prayer

Get acquainted time If the members of your group were new to each other last week, then re-introduce yourselves today. *Briefly* share in a couple sentences one of your earliest recollections about Jesus.

Group discussion/Personal reflection questions

1. Which one of this week's six devotions caught your interest the most? Why that one?
2. Day 1. See paragraph one. Why do you think J. Vernon McGee said that John 14:20 is the most profound statement in the Bible? Do you agree? Why or why not? What other verse might you choose as the most profound?
3. Day 1. Andrew Murray wrote (pages 104-105), "The difference between Jesus and us is great – the oneness is greater." What do you think he meant by that?
4. Day 1. *Have you ever considered that Jesus is closer to you than anyone else can be? Are you ready to experience that closeness day by day? If so, talk to the Lord about your desire to truly live united with Him.*
5. Day 2. Lewis Smedes explained (page 108) that believers are not told in the Bible that they ought to die to sin because they have *already* died to sin, and it is imperative that believers affirm the facts about themselves.
What is he talking about? What do those "facts" mean for our lives today?
6. Day 2. *Can you make the same claim that Paul did in Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live..."? Think about what that means, and ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand the experience of "with Christ" more fully.*
7. Day 2. Re-read Romans 6:1-11 and Colossians 3:1-3, and discuss them as a group. What do you find hard to grasp in those passages? Sometimes we fail to understand what the Bible says because while we can see the meaning with our intellect, our experience falls short of what the Bible describes. Do you think that is true of these passages? Why or why not?

[Perhaps this might help: A Bible college professor always told his class, "If your Christian experience does not match how the Bible describes Christian life, doubt your experience, *not* the Bible." If and when that happens, please realize we can go to the Lord and tell Him that we want to experience *all* that He died to give us and make possible in our lives.]
8. Day 3. When we try to produce "fruit" (Galatians 5:22-23) on our own by our own efforts, we easily become discouraged by our failures. We have a hard time always loving others, we cannot kindle an ever-present joy within, and being patient is impossible. What does the Bible say is the answer to our dilemma?

9. Day 3. Jesus told us to remain in Him. How do you think we do that best? What helps you to stay close to Jesus? What sometimes gets in the way and threatens to break the connection with Him? Share your thoughts with the group.
10. Day 3. *Jesus said God the Father prunes us to make us more fruitful. Do you think more fruit is worth the pruning process? If you could, would you like to negotiate with the Father to "let up" on you? Talk to the Lord about your feelings.*
11. Day 4. When, if ever, have you been quite certain that you heard the Shepherd addressing you personally? What means did He use to speak to you? (Day 4's devotion mentions some possibilities.) If you are willing, share your experience with the group.
12. Day 4. What do you think is one of the greatest blessings in being a sheep in the Lord's flock?
13. Day 5. It has been debated back and forth whether a person can be a believer and choose not to be a disciple. Some Bible teachers say salvation is free for all who receive it in faith while discipleship is for those willing to pay the price. What is your opinion? What advantages are there in being a disciple?
14. Day 6. Friendship with Jesus is an incredible privilege! We know that Jesus loves us. The Bible is more than clear about that! How important to you is it that Jesus also *likes* you? Or haven't you ever thought about it?
15. Day 6. See paragraph 4. The quote by Oswald Chambers says that we determine the degree of intimacy that we will enjoy with Jesus. The quote by McGee in that same paragraph is similar. What do you think?
16. *What is one thing you think the Lord wants you to know and apply to your life as a result of reading of your union with Jesus Christ?*

Prayer requests Share with the group any needs for which you would like the members of the group to pray during the week. Share, too, any answers to prayer for which you want to thank the Lord.

Close in prayer Have silent prayer for a few moments, thanking the Lord Jesus for who He is and for what He has done for us. Then everyone who wants to voice *one* thank you out loud in prayer should do so. [*But do not go around the circle, putting anyone on the spot to pray aloud!*] When everyone who wants to pray has done so, and there is silence, close with the Lord's Prayer.

SAINTS

“Saints” is a title that causes some confusion among believers. The word in the original Greek (*hagioi*) means “holy ones.” That certainly would lead most of us to conclude, “That leaves me out!” The verb form of saint (*hagiazō*) means “to sanctify” or “to make holy.”

God’s Word declares that all believers are in fact “saints.” Paul often addressed his letters “to the saints” at various locations, e.g. at Ephesus or at Philippi. The NIV keeps the literal translation, e.g., “To God’s holy people in Ephesus.” Those who believe in Jesus are *already* saints; they are *already* sanctified, *already* made holy (I Corinthians 1:2; 6:11).

What does it mean to be a saint, a holy person? In the Old Testament, to be holy meant to be set apart for God and His use, separated from the mundane. Believers in Christ are clearly set apart for Him, belonging to Him as spouses belong to each other and to no one else. Moreover, the prophets teach us that there is also a moral aspect to holiness; holiness must be reflected in our lifestyles. Jesus said as much in the Sermon on the Mount: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). We are warned “without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14). **Holiness is who God is!** Without it, there can be no fellowship with Him.

That God considers us to be holy already in spite of our continuing to sin is called definitive or positional sanctification. How is it that we, who continue to sin, are holy? Does God simply choose to look the other way and ignore the reality of our ongoing sin? Pretending that we are what He knows we are not? Of course not! **Our holiness is real, but it is not our own.** It is because we are “in Christ” that God can declare us holy. Jesus Christ is our righteousness and our holiness (I Corinthians 1:30). He took our sins upon Himself and now grants us *His* holiness.

At the same time, **the Holy Spirit is at work in us to bring our lives into alignment with who we are in Christ. This is called progressive or practical sanctification.** Increasingly, through His work, we are becoming more like Jesus – in our thoughts, deeds, values, attitudes, aspirations – because that is God’s ultimate goal for us (Romans 8:29). It is why God has saved us, why Jesus died for us. We were chosen in order “to be holy and blameless in His sight” to His glory (Ephesians 1:4).

Little by little, the Holy Spirit is teaching us to draw on the life of Jesus within us. It is not a speedy process! The Spirit’s sanctifying work will continue throughout our lifetimes on earth. Sometimes it may feel like we are making no progress at all! Fortunately, the Holy Spirit does not get discouraged or give up on us! Remember, in the Lord’s sight, we are already saints!

What is our part in sanctification? We are called to a holy life (II Timothy 1:9) and to “be holy in all you do” (I Peter 1:15). We cannot achieve holiness on our own, but we can cooperate with the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives. “Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God” (II Corinthians 7:1). We will fail at times, but then we must remember that forgiveness is God’s gift to us. His Word reminds us: “as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:12). God chooses to forget our sins! If that sounds too good to be true, check out Hebrews 8:12!

Blessed Holy Spirit, teach me to cooperate with You as You continue Your sanctifying work in me.

CHILDREN OF LIGHT

Darkness in the Bible symbolizes confusion, ignorance, and error. It is a metaphor for evil and sin. The “dominion of darkness” (Colossians 1:13), into which each of us was born, claims most of the world’s population, people who do not know the true God. Although those who reject God might consider themselves wise, their thinking is “futile,” their hearts “darkened” (Romans 1:21-22).

People who are in darkness cannot comprehend spiritual truth, considering such truth to be foolishness (I Corinthians 2:14). How many of us have endured college professors who ridiculed the Bible? “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel...” (II Corinthians 4:4). One who is born blind has no concept of color. Likewise, spiritual truth simply does not register with those who remain in darkness.

On the other hand, the Lord “has rescued us from the dominion of darkness...” (Colossians 1:13), and we are now “children of light” (Ephesians 5:8). We have Jesus’ promise, “I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in Me should stay in darkness” (John 12:46). And we have His declaration: “I am the Light of the World. Whoever follows Me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).

Scholars point out that Jesus made that declaration during the Feast of Tabernacles. One night during that week, huge candelabras were lit in the Temple courtyard, reminding the people that when God brought their ancestors out of Egyptian slavery, He led them with a “pillar of fire” through the wilderness (Exodus 13:21). In that context, **Jesus’ announcement meant anyone who followed Him would have His guidance. We need not wander our way through life each day.**

In Genesis 1:2, there was emptiness and chaos until God spoke: “Let there be light.” The same is true of our lives (II Corinthians 4:6). Chaos, confusion, and emptiness were put to flight. We now have direction and purpose. In addition, as “children of the light and of the day,” we can discern the signs of the times (I Thessalonians 5:1-6). “We have the mind of Christ” (I Corinthians 2:16)!

To “have the mind of Christ” means we can look at life from His perspective. As children of light, our minds are enlightened. With the Holy Spirit’s help (I Corinthians 2:14b), we can grasp spiritual truth and apply it to our lives. As we mature in Christ, our spiritual perception increases. It becomes easier to discern the truth from falsehood and to identify the lies of the devil in the accusations, temptations, and assaults that come against us (II Corinthians 2:11). We can do so because we have been brought “from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18). To help us guard our minds, the Bible gives us a list of things to think about in Philippians 4:8-9: whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy.

Paul prayed that believers would be enlightened so as to understand all the riches that the Lord had *already* made available to them (Ephesians 1:18-19). Indeed, **that is the goal of this devotional: that we clearly see all that the Lord has *already* made available to us so that we can lead meaningful, victorious lives that are well-pleasing to Him.** [In the coming weeks, we will look at the effect living in the light has on our actions.]

Holy Spirit, continue to enlighten me that I might truly grasp spiritual truth and walk in the light.

CITIZENS OF HEAVEN

Believers in Jesus are blessed with citizenship in heaven (Philippians 3:20). Jesus told us to “rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20). We are on the official roster of citizens! It is crucial, however, that we not see our citizenship solely as a future reality. Not only did we become citizens when the Lord saved us, but **we are even now in heaven** for “God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms...” (Ephesians 2:6) – past tense. It is a present day reality. Radio preacher J. Vernon McGee assures us that we are in fact right now in heaven with Christ even if we are “down in the dumps” here on earth.²⁸

How does our being with Christ in the heavenly realms impact our life down here “in the dumps”? Perspective! **We can view things from heaven’s perspective.** That perspective takes into account God’s sovereignty: God is in control! It takes into account eternity: what seems so important now may be ultimately meaningless. It takes into account the love and grace of God: we are loved and cared for every moment of every day. It takes into account that our true home is in heaven: whatever happens on earth, we will be welcomed into our forever home one day.

Seeing things from heaven’s perspective, from a position “above it all,” also requires a change of focus down here! “So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal” (II Corinthians 4:18). “Unseen” does not mean totally nebulous or nonmaterial. It is simply that we cannot see it yet with our physical eyes. What is currently invisible to us is actually what is most real, and in the case of heaven, the most valuable. Hebrews 12:2 likewise urges us to win in life by “fixing our eyes on Jesus.”

In a similar passage, **we are told to set both our hearts and our minds “on things above, not on earthly things”** (Colossians 3:1-2). The tense of the imperative verb “set” means a continuing action as in “keep focused” or “stay focused” on things above. In Greek it “actually means ‘having an urgency and a desire and an ambition’” like that of an athlete pursuing a gold medal.²⁹ “Earthly things” are not all evil or in any way negative, but “things above” will last and are the most worthwhile. **“Above” is where we are headed, our destination, the land where we are citizens! Of course our focus should be there and upon the King under whom we citizens live and serve.**

Obviously, we live on this earth, sometimes “in the dumps,” where we must deal with family crises, inflation, sickness, car and house repairs, crime, incivility, etc., besides distressing world events. Seeing these from heaven’s viewpoint won’t make them go away. Nor can we refuse to involve ourselves in the hassles of everyday life with the excuse of focusing on “things above.”

How did the Apostle Paul deal with all the problems and sufferings that he faced? He described them as “light and momentary troubles” when compared to the “eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (II Corinthians 4:17), the eternal glory that will be ours one day. The picture is one like that of the scales of justice. On one side of the scale are the “light” troubles of today that *seem* so heavy. On the other side is the overwhelming, “weighty” glory we will experience one day in the Lord’s presence. There is no comparison! Keeping that in mind is to see the trials of life from heaven’s perspective. **Feeling down? Discouraged? You might need a change of perspective!**

Lord God, help me to view life here below from my position up above as a citizen of heaven.

CO-HEIRS WITH CHRIST

People occasionally fantasize about winning the lottery or receiving a huge inheritance from some long-lost relative. **God's Word promises believers in Christ an extraordinary inheritance**, one awaiting us in heaven. The Lord has even given us a "guarantee," a pledge, that it will be ours: the gift of the Holy Spirit to every believer (II Corinthians 1:22).

In Scripture, an inheritance did not necessarily mean what one would receive at the death of the benefactor. While it does carry the idea of a *future* gift, one could receive one's inheritance at any time. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the father divided his estate to his sons while he was still living (Luke 15:11-12). In the Bible an "inheritance" was "a secure possession."³⁰

Jesus Christ, the Son of God and the only worthy Heir, is the One whom the Father "appointed heir of all things" (Hebrews 1:2). It is clear from His Parable of the Tenants that Jesus understood Himself to be the Heir (Mark 12:1-11). Given our adoption into the Father's family, we have become co-heirs with Jesus (Romans 8:17; Titus 3:7).

What we are to inherit is nothing less than the Kingdom of God, the new heaven and new earth (II Peter 3:13) in which God is the sole Ruler and His will is unopposed. Jesus spoke often of the Kingdom. At the beginning of His ministry, He proclaimed, "The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15). The night before His death, He told His disciples, "I confer on you a kingdom, just as My Father conferred one on Me" (Luke 22:29). The Kingdom broke into our world and came near with the coming of Jesus, the King. Christians experience the Kingdom now, but only partially. Its fulfillment awaits the return of Jesus Christ.

Our inheritance includes eternal life and a home forever with the Lord. Jesus spoke of that home in John 14. He obviously intended that we understand that heaven is indeed a real place. We shall have new bodies – imperishable spiritual bodies (I Corinthians 15:42-44). When Jesus returns, He "will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body" (Philippians 3:21).

Our inheritance "can never perish, spoil, or fade" (I Peter 1:4). Possessions here on earth can lose their beauty and usefulness. The stock market can crash. Things we treasure can be stolen. Our inheritance will last forever and be as treasured 10 million years from now as it was on day one.

Our delight, enjoyment, and wonder in that new heaven and new earth will *never* lessen.

As one biblical scholar noted, "...the eternal inheritance, the Kingdom of God, eternal life, etc., are all ultimately summed up in the words 'to be with Christ' (Philippians 1:23; cf. John 14:3). Jesus Christ Himself is our future, our inheritance."³¹ **We will forever be enraptured by Jesus Christ!**

All of this is "the hope to which He has called you..." (Ephesians 1:18). In the Bible, hope does not mean wishing for what may or may not happen. Hope means confidence in the certain fulfillment of God's promises (Hebrews 6:16-20). "That's why hope is called the anchor of the soul...In the midst of doubts, confusion, and changing circumstances, there's an anchor that keeps us secure and stable, and that anchor is hope. Hope is simply our trust in God's future promises."³²

Lord Jesus, thank You for the hope that sees beyond this world to a glorious future with You.

GOD'S HANDIWORK

There are many passages in the Bible that sound foreign to our usual way of thinking. **“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds...”** (James 1:2) falls into that category. The word translated trials refers to temptations, persecution, calamities, afflictions, tests – generally not the experiences we greet with joy! James explains, however, that for the believer, these trials have the ultimate purpose of bringing us to maturity (James 1:4).

“We are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10). “Handiwork” translates the Greek *poiēma*, from which we get the word “poem.” **We are God’s workmanship, His masterpiece, a work of art.** It is not the same as creation which God spoke into existence. *Poiēma* refers to something that is made. It is a gradual work, the result of craftsmanship. Each believer is a unique piece of God’s handiwork.

We were born again, adopted into God’s family, in an instant. Now, in what is a life-long process, God is shaping us to be what He desires. While the Holy Spirit is working in us, transforming us into holy people, **God the Father is molding our character so that we will grow up to be adult sons and daughters, dependable, faithful, and prepared for service in His Kingdom.** And it is not a comfortable process! Like James, Paul claimed that “we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Romans 5:3-4). As has often been said, God is more interested in our character than our comfort.

The Lord never promised us a trouble-free life. Just the opposite! Jesus said, “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33). **Trials, problems, suffering – they are not an “if” in our lives but a “when.” They will come, but never without the Father’s express design.** All that God allows in our lives has a purpose. God the Father is sovereign in the lives of His children, intimately involved with each one of us. There are no accidents in the lives of believers; no such thing as luck.

Both James in 1:2-4 and Paul in Romans 5:3-5 insist believers’ trials are not meaningless nor are tragedies senseless. God is using them to perfect us. Peter compared our suffering to gold being refined in the fire (I Peter 1:6-7). Romans 8:28 assures us that the Lord will work in *every* circumstance for the good of those who love Him. There are, however, two different Greek words for good: *kalos*, meaning beautiful, pleasing, and *agathos*, meaning beneficial, useful. It is the latter which we see in Romans. **God can use all that we endure and make it ultimately beneficial to our lives.** Some of the benefits – for example, the growth we experience – will be seen by the people around us, and God may use us to help some of them in some way in their own trials. Nevertheless, all of the benefits of our trials will not be evident until we stand before the Lord.

Unless one is a masochist, considering our trials as “pure joy” and taking “glory” in our sufferings is only possible through faith – the **faith that trusts that God is at work in those unpleasant, hard experiences to bring about some of His most breathtaking masterpieces: you and me!** “We grow through what we go through.” That is the reason for patiently, if not joyfully, enduring our trials.

Remember: **God is for you**, not against you (Romans 8:31). God is on your side (if you are on His!).

Father God, may I trust You, patiently allowing You to shape me, Your handiwork, as You please.

MORE THAN CONQUERORS

“He bids us soar, yet we have no wings.”³³ In those words, F. J. Huegel describes the dilemma many Christians feel. Scripture speaks of victorious living and calls Christians “more than conquerors” (Romans 8:37). Jesus expected His followers to experience His peace (John 14:27). “Everyone born of God overcomes the world” (I John 5:4), but instead, many Christians have been overcome! “Christians often...accept as normal an up-and-down spiritual existence...inwardly they consider themselves only as sinners saved by grace, hanging on until the rapture” (i.e. the return of Christ).³⁴ “Hanging on” is not soaring! How do we get “spiritual wings”?

First, we need to realize that the Lord has already given us the wings to soar. They are not our own. They come from Him. **It is the life of Jesus in us! It is our position in Christ**, seated in the heavenly realms. **It is our identity in Christ** – children of God, a new creation, branches of the Vine. Much of our failure to soar comes from our failure to see who we are in Christ. We see the weakness that is our own but not the strength He has poured into our lives. “You will receive power,” Jesus told us, “when the Holy Spirit comes on you...” (Acts 1:8). God has given us “every spiritual blessing in Christ” (Ephesians 1:3). We have everything that we need to be conquerors.

Paul understood his new identity and asserted, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13 NKJV). Can we accept that as true of us too? Can we accept God’s Word as fact? **We are who God says we are!** We cannot allow our doubts and negative feelings – “But I don’t *feel* strong!” – to persuade us otherwise! Live like you believe God’s Word, *not your feelings*.

Secondly, we need to have a realistic view of what the life of a conqueror looks like. In Greek there is a word for conqueror, but by adding the prefix *hyper* (i.e. “hyper”) to it, it means super-conqueror, one who wins a *decisive* victory. Paul used that prefix, so we read “we are *more than conquerors*” (Romans 8:37). Verse 36, however, depicts believers as those who “face death all day long” and who “are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” Being super-conquerors clearly does *not* mean everything goes our way! It does not mean that we always come out ahead or pain free.

To conquer is to come through trials and tribulations with our faith intact. No matter what the world or the devil throws at us – Romans 8:35 lists many of those arrows – we know the Lord will bring us through, so we can weather any storm and have inner peace in the midst of it. God is in control! Since God is for us, nothing can ultimately destroy us, and absolutely nothing can separate us from God’s love (Romans 8:31, 39). Death, our worst enemy, has been conquered!

To be a conqueror is to come through struggles and trials without bitterness, anger, or self-pity. To be a conqueror is to have a faith-filled outlook. It is to live with hope, always looking up, although sometimes through tears. That is simply not possible in our own strength, no matter how hard we try. It *is* possible through the power of the Lord’s life within us. When we do have a down, less-than-conqueror day, we can turn to the Lord and ask His help in learning to live by His strength and to draw on His resources. **“Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles...”** (Isaiah 40:31). Live close to Jesus! The Lord will make you a super-conqueror in *His* strength. [For an incredible testimony of one overcomer, see Appendix C.]

Lord, forgive me for letting myself be overcome when You have made me a super-conqueror.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION AND/OR PERSONAL REFLECTION

Open in prayer

Get acquainted time Re-introduce yourselves by name if yours is a new group this Lent. Choosing someone outside your own family, tell the group *in two or three sentences* about one person you know or have known who demonstrated saint-like behavior.

Group discussion/Personal reflection questions

1. Which one of this week's six devotions caught your interest the most? Why that one?
2. Day 1. Warren Wiersbe explained (page 454), that when Paul addressed his letters to the saints, he "wrote to people who, through faith in Jesus Christ, had been set apart for God's special enjoyment and use." We often consider how God might "use" us, but have you ever considered that God might "enjoy" you? What do you think about that possibility?
3. Day 1. *How well do you think you are "cooperating" with the Holy Spirit in His work of sanctification? We are told to "keep in step with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25). How might you be more cooperative, keeping in step with the Holy Spirit as He works in your life?*
4. Day 2. Think of a time when the Lord clearly guided you. If you are willing to do so, tell the group about it.
5. Day 2. Where do you see strong differences between the way you, as a believer, think about things and the way any of your unbelieving family members or friends think? In what ways is it clear that they are still in darkness?
6. Day 3. How does the way we see things in our own lives or in world events change when we view them from heaven's perspective? As a group, come up with 3 or 4 examples.
7. Day 3. *What in your life right now do you need to see from heaven's perspective? Where do you need a change of perspective? Talk to the Lord about that.*
8. Day 3. The Apostle Paul was clearly a practical man. He did not go around with his head in the clouds. Nor does the Lord want us, as the cliché says, to be so heavenly-minded that we are of no earthly good. Yet God's Word tells us to stay focused on things above. So, how can we do that in the midst of our hectic lives here on earth? What advantages are there in not being too absorbed in "earthly things" (Colossians 3:1-2)?
9. Day 4. As believers in Jesus, someday our feet will stand on the new earth. A billion years from now, we will be alive and well, exhilarated and still filled with wonder and praise and love for the Lord. In what ways can that fact (and it *is* a fact) impact our lives today?
10. Day 5. J. Vernon McGee says (vol. 4, page 675), "It takes trouble to bring out the best in the believer's life." Do you agree? Why or why not? Can you give a personal example?

11. Day 5. *People react very differently to suffering. The Bible commends patience and even rejoicing because of what the Lord can do through our suffering. But our reactions might also include resignation, bitterness, self-pity, anger toward God, impatience, doubt. How do you respond? How would you like to respond?*

12. Day 5. How confident are you that God is 100% sovereign and that there are no such things as accidents or luck in the lives of His children?

13. Day 6. “More than conquerors” is one of those biblical descriptions of Christian life that does not always seem to play out in the actual experience of many believers. [See the discussion guide for Week Two, question 7.] **Until we can believe that it is indeed the Lord’s will for each of us to be a conqueror in life, it won’t happen!** Do *you* believe it? Why or why not?

In what ways might we need to adjust our understanding of what it means to be a conqueror in life in order to actually become the kind of conqueror the Bible speaks of?

14. Day 6. Read Appendix C if you have not done so already. In what ways is Joni an example of a true conqueror? If you know someone who is “more than a conqueror” in Christ, tell the group about that person.

15. *What is one thing you think the Lord wants you to remember and apply to your life as a result of reading of the blessings He has for you?*

Prayer requests Share with the group any needs for which you would like the members of the group to pray during the week. Share, too, any answers to prayer for which you want to thank the Lord.

Close in prayer You can read this prayer in unison or if you prefer, compose your own. *Our Father and our God, You have granted us incredible blessings yet we can hardly believe they are really for us today. Help us to see ourselves as You see us and as You desire us to be – saints, co-heirs with Your Son, and conquerors. Give us patience as You make us into Your masterpieces. Teach us to walk in the light, and open our eyes to see life and the world from the vantage point of heaven. Father, enable us to overcome our doubts and to believe Your Word and Your promises! We pray in the Name of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

RUNNERS IN THE RACE

In Christ, we are “more than conquerors,” but that does not mean we simply glide through life, doing as we please and ending up in heaven someday. God has work for us to do! A purpose to fulfill! Rewards to earn! To help us see what that means, the Bible points to athletics.

In I Corinthians 9:24-27, Paul spoke of runners in a race, of boxing, and “the games.” The Isthmian Games took place in Corinth the year before and the year after the Olympic Games. Having spent time in Corinth, Paul may have attended the games. Paul wrote of pressing on toward the goal to win the prize (Philippians 3:14). He chided the Galatians (in 5:7) because they “were running a good race” but had allowed others to “cut in” on them. In his second letter to Timothy, looking toward his own death, he declared, “I have finished the race” (II Timothy 4:7).

The race we are running is not to win salvation. Salvation is ours as a gift, paid for by Jesus Christ. The race we run refers to fulfilling God’s will for our lives and winning His approval. When we stand before the judgment seat of Christ (II Corinthians 5:10), we will want to hear these words, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” and receive a reward (Matthew 25:21). The extent of our rewards will depend on how faithfully we have served the Lord.

The word used for “judgment seat” (*bēma*) is also from the Isthmian Games. The *bēma* was a raised platform where the judges of the games sat to make sure the rules were followed. It was also where the judge presented the winning athletes with the prize, usually a wreath of some sort. Thus Paul spoke of his desire to win a crown – a lasting one! (I Corinthians 9:25).

Hebrews 12:1-3 tells us how to run to win. “...throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.” **Runners can’t be encumbered with anything that would slow them down.** For the believer, that might be some sin that we refuse to let go, telling ourselves it is no big deal. It might be a negative attitude that weighs us down. Or it might be something good and pleasant, but it keeps us from being able to give ourselves wholeheartedly to the Lord. Paul said in his own race, he forgets what is behind (Philippians 3:13). Regrets and past failures weigh us down, so let them go. When one is in a race, there is only one thing that matters: winning the prize.

In addition, we must “run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Hebrews 12:1). The Greek word for perseverance is often translated as endurance, but it is not passively waiting out the storm. “It is the quality which keeps a man on his feet with his face to the wind...Beyond the pain, it sees the goal.”³⁵ To persevere day after day in the race in spite of weariness, pain, and stumbling takes strenuous effort. The Greek word for race is *agōn*, the root word of “agony”!

Keeping our focus on Jesus will enable us to persevere: “fixing our eyes on Jesus” (Hebrews 12:2). That means, “Looking to Him to see what He is, to hear what He speaks, to do what He says, to follow where He leads, to trust for all He waits to give.” And to do that throughout the day – at work or leisure, in church or at the office, alone or in a crowd, in trouble or in celebration.³⁶ Inwardly, in whatever we’re doing, Jesus is to remain in view. He is our motivation and example, having endured the cross. With our eyes on Jesus, let’s get moving!

Lord, don’t allow anything to convince me to give up the race! Keep me on my feet!

TEMPLES OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Before serious runners enter a race, they train and keep their bodies fit. They practice discipline in their diets, sleep patterns, and exercise routines. Although the race Christians run is not an athletic one, we too must take good care of our bodies and avoid indulging in unhealthy practices. Paul explained that he made his body his slave so that he would not be disqualified from winning the prize (I Corinthians 9:27). The Greek word translated “disqualified” is another term that came from the Greek games, and it meant losing the prize and any reward.³⁷

Many Greeks of Paul’s day held that only the soul was eternal. To them, the body and all material things were despicable. Because the body was not eternal, many thought they could do with it as they pleased. Sexual immorality was common and was condemned by Paul in I Corinthians 6:9-20.

For Christians, however, our bodies have great significance. For one thing, we “were bought at a price” – body, soul, and spirit. God, therefore, can say to us “You are not your own” (I Corinthians 6:19-20). We are not to do what we please with our own bodies because, if we are believers, they are no longer our own. They belong to Jesus Christ who purchased us with His own blood (I Peter 1:18-19). We are therefore to honor God with our bodies (I Corinthians 6:20).

Furthermore, once we became believers, the Holy Spirit came into our lives, into our bodies, so that our bodies are now temples of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 6:19). We would do nothing to dirty or damage the homes of friends of ours, and likewise, we ought to feel an obligation to do nothing to damage or deface the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, i.e. our bodies. When we serve God by singing in the choir, buying mac and cheese for the Food Bank, or speaking with a friend about Jesus, we do so with our bodies. They are instruments of righteousness for the Lord to use as He wills (Romans 6:13). We are obligated to care for our bodies as athletes care for theirs.

Thirdly, as believers we have been joined to Christ (I Corinthians 6:15, 17). We are united with Jesus – He is in us and we are in Him (John 14:20). That is why a believer engaging in sexual immorality or indulging in lustful behavior commits a heinous sin (I Corinthians 6:18-19). Sexual purity is to be our way of life. *TableTalk* editor, Aaron Garriott, echoes this truth: “My body— united to Christ’s body — is sacred, and the Spirit is within me wherever I go and whatever I do. Joined together in a vital union to the holy Son of God; a living, walking, sacred temple of God – do you see your body that way, Christian?”³⁸ Do we?

On Resurrection Day, believers will be given new bodies (I Corinthians 15:35-57). Our bodies will be like Jesus’ body (Philippians 3:21), so the body is to “be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Thessalonians 5:23). Believers are to “purify themselves” (I John 3:2-3).

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship” (Romans 12:1). Remembering that Jesus gave His body for us, we offer up to God each morning our bodies and all that we are along with all the activities of that day. Then we seek to please the Lord, not ourselves, throughout the day, and daily life itself becomes an act of worship!

Lord God, I acknowledge that I do belong to You, and I want to honor You in everything I do.

BEARERS OF THE CROSS

Among the most shocking statements Jesus ever made to the crowds was His demand that His disciples carry a cross and follow Him. The demands Jesus made of His disciples in 30 A.D. have not been set aside or relaxed. The call to bear the cross is still in effect! We sometimes trivialize its meaning and speak of annoyances as “my cross to bear.” Annoyances are not a cross. Neither are people whom we must “put up with.” **What does cross-bearing mean for us?**

First and foremost, it emphasizes that following Jesus will not be easy. Jesus never begged anyone to follow Him. He cautioned would-be followers to count the cost. In Luke 14:25-33, “we find perhaps the supreme instance of His statement of the terms of discipleship. In the course of His words there is a thrice-repeated phrase, ‘cannot be My disciple.’”³⁹ Would-be disciples were told they must “hate” their own families and their own lives (v.26), they must carry their cross (v.27) and “give up everything you have” (v.33); otherwise, they could not be His disciples.

While Jesus sometimes used hyperbole, e.g. Matthew 5:29, we must be careful not to miss His meaning. **Jesus is saying that He must have the Number One place** in our lives, even above our families. We are to love our relatives, but Jesus will not tolerate being in competition with them. His claims on us come first. If we are in a situation in which we face death for Jesus’ sake, then our love for Him must come before the love of our own lives. Our possessions must be at His disposal. Likewise, our time. *Indeed, we must be at His disposal!* Nothing can hinder our fidelity to Jesus.

Bearing the cross is “the real reason...that no man can follow Jesus and ever again do what he likes. To follow Jesus may well mean the sacrifice of the pleasures, habits, aims, ambitions which have woven themselves into our lives.”⁴⁰ When He calls us to do something or tells us to go someplace, His call is absolute. No excuses accepted! No delays permitted! [See Luke 9:57-62.]

Bearing the cross is suffering and loss endured solely because we belong to Jesus Christ. While we are not currently facing martyrdom or destruction of our property as believers elsewhere are now experiencing, Christians in the U.S. have lost jobs because of obedience to Christ. To stand up for Jesus and not hide one’s faith in spite of ridicule or humiliation is to bear the cross. “It is an honor and a privilege to suffer with Christ...’The fellowship of His sufferings’ is a gift from God (Philippians 1:29; 3:10)...we ought to rejoice when the privilege comes to us.”⁴¹

Jesus’ suffering on the cross was vicarious; He “made Himself nothing” (Philippians 2:7) on behalf of others. When we suffer vicariously for other people, we are bearing the cross. That means giving ourselves “beyond the normal call of duty” to someone who needs us – childcare, transportation, fixing meals, yardwork, financial support, a listening ear – while setting aside our own needs and affairs. Using our time in intercessory prayer for others, too, is bearing the cross.

Given that for Jesus the cross was God’s will for Him, “my cross represents God’s will for me. We take up our cross when we make the same decision Jesus made: to do the will of God daily, whatever the cost or wherever God’s will may lead us.”⁴² This is especially true when God’s will is at odds with what we might want to do. Then like Jesus, we pray, “Thy will, not mine, be done.”

Lord Jesus, give me courage to carry my cross for You and to always pray, “Thy will be done.”

SOLDIERS AT WAR

“Once we have identified with Jesus Christ...we are part of a war. We did not start the war; God declared war on Satan.”⁴³ For that reason, we too struggle “against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). While Jesus won the decisive victory on the cross, the forces of evil will still be active in the world until that day when they will be thrown into hell. [See Appendix D on Spiritual Warfare.] “Mopping up battles” often continue after a war has been won, and that phrase describes our struggles as well.

While Satan and his demons cannot sever the elect from the Lord, they aim to lure us into sin, discourage us, wear us down, and prevent us from understanding who we truly are in Christ and the power that is ours in Him. Thus they try to keep us “anemic,” rendering us impotent. They try to intimidate us and block us from the work God has for us to do.

Often the enemy’s attacks come against our minds with lies that sow doubts about God and His goodness, about our own relationship to God, and about the people we love. The enemy wants to stir up lustful images, irrational fears, jealousy, pride, and other evils in our minds. We often wonder where such thoughts come from but remember, Satan is “a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:44). Luther compared such unwelcome thoughts to birds flying overhead: we cannot prevent them from doing so, but we can make sure they don’t build a nest in our hair! That is why **it is crucial to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ”** (II Corinthians 10:5).

Because our enemies are spirit beings, our weapons must be different from the kind the world uses. Our weapons “have divine power” (II Corinthians 10:4). The **Word of God** is our sword (Ephesians 6:17). Jesus used Scripture in His battle against temptation (Luke 4). We counter Satan’s lies with God’s Word. Never allow the Bible’s truth or authority to be undermined.

We have the **power of the Holy Spirit** within us – “the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (I John 4:4). **Prayer** is another weapon in our arsenal (James 5:16). In prayer, we access God’s resources and claim His promises. **Fasting** reinforces our prayers in especially needy or troubling situations (Mark 9:29). Speaking the **Name of Jesus** is authoritative against the enemy (Luke 10:17; Acts 16:16-18). **Living a godly life** strengthens us against the devil’s schemes.

Revelation 12:11 shows us that saints overcame Satan **“by the blood of the Lamb”** – Jesus’ victory on the cross -- and by **“their testimony”** and by their **willingness to die** for their faith. We are not yet faced with death for Jesus’ sake, but we would do well to be able to share our testimonies with others, our own stories of what God has done for us and in our lives! We have **spiritual armor** for our defense (Ephesians 6:14-17). **We can “resist the devil, and he will flee” from us** (James 4:7).

Know this: you are a soldier! No one can be neutral in this war! Paul encouraged Timothy (and us!) to “fight the battle well” (I Timothy 1:18). “We are to recognize that the Christian life is not a playground. It is a battlefield where battles are being won, and battles are being lost also. There is a real spiritual battle going on,”⁴⁴ but the devil’s power is limited, while we can be “strong in the Lord and in His mighty power” (Ephesians 6:10). The final victory has already been won.

Holy Spirit, fortify my faith that it may always be a shield against the weapons of the enemy.

DOERS OF THE WORD

“Faith alone justifies yet the faith which justifies is not alone.” John Calvin (1509 – 1564), the Reformer, wrote that in his *Antidote to the Council of Trent*. As believers, we contributed nothing to our justification, i.e. our being made righteous in God’s sight. We can do nothing, zilch, nada, to merit salvation. It is ours by God’s grace alone, a gift received by faith.

Living holy lives in obedience to the Lord would not have been possible for us before our new birth. Now because we are new creations, living in Christ and Christ in us, God calls us to obedience, to good works, to living out our new identity in Christ. In a life-long process, we are to become more like Jesus in the way we live. “From the instant of your regeneration [new birth], for the rest of your Christian life, that process is synergistic. It is a joint venture between you and God.”⁴⁵ This is what Calvin meant. We have a responsibility to participate in that process.

A good place to begin is to know what God’s Word tells us to do and then to make every effort to do it! **“Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves”** (James 1:22 NKJV). Bible study that does not result in a response on our parts is useless or worse! Jesus said that hearing His words and *putting them into practice* is like building our lives on the rock while hearing His words and *not* putting them into practice is like building on sand (Matthew 7:24-27).

Paul frequently included ethical instructions in his letters, presenting two distinct actions to take. First was the necessity of rejecting any sin that belongs to the “old nature.” Paul named some of those deeds in his letters, e.g. Galatians 5:16-21; Ephesians 4:22-31; Colossians 3:5-10. To follow sinful practices can lead to our being enslaved by them. Second was the obligation to engage in behaviors appropriate for children of God in every aspect of their lives, like those mentioned in Colossians 3:12-15 and I Thessalonians 5:12-22. How well do we measure up to the standard?

To become “Doers of the Word,” we can ask basic questions when we study a Bible passage.

- 1) What does it say?** Simply re-state the basic message in your own words without explanation.
- 2) What does it mean?** This is a little harder. A good Study Bible can help or perhaps a one-volume commentary. If you belong to a Bible study group, discuss it with the other members.
- 3) What does it mean to me?** Now it becomes personal! What is the Lord saying to you in these verses? When we don’t have a clue, we can re-read it slowly a few times. Note what words stand out to you, and think about why those words stand out. Ask the Holy Spirit, “What are You telling me through this passage about my life, my behavior, my circumstances, my relationships?”
- 4) What am I going to do about this?** If we are to be Doers of the Word, that is a crucial question!

Let’s not be hearers only! Make specific plans to put what you have heard from the Lord into practice. Don’t simply file the plans away in the recesses of your mind like so many New Year’s resolutions! Write them down. Many Christians keep a journal where they can track what the Lord is telling them and the actions they will take to obey Him along with their progress.

Don’t be discouraged. The Holy Spirit is working within us. He won’t give up on us. Sanctification, making us holy, is His work in us and with us as we cooperate with Him.

Lord, I’m sorry for letting Your word come in one ear and go out the other. I want to be a Doer!

STEWARDS OF GOD'S BOUNTY

The steward in biblical times was comparable to a personal manager today. Stewards would handle their master's wealth, wisely investing it or distributing it as needed. Stewards took care of their master's property. Stewards were overseers of their master's slaves and hired help. Many stewards were trusted slaves themselves, as was Joseph, Potiphar's steward (Genesis 39:1-6). They would periodically have to give an account to their masters for all that was in their charge.

Jesus once told His would-be followers, "those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be My disciples" (Luke 14:33). The Greek verb means "renounce," not "get rid of." While Jesus did tell a certain rich man to sell all he had in order to follow Him (Luke 18:22), here Jesus is saying that "we surrender to Him the title deed to all we possess. From now on we live as those conscious that **we are stewards of our Lord**, and that all we have belongs ultimately to Him."⁴⁶ For some believers, even that is a difficult concession to make!

Stewardship encompasses more than our wealth and possessions. Our abilities and talents, our jobs, our time, our relationships, our opportunities, our bodies – we acknowledge all we are and have is ours as a gift and belongs, when all is said and done, to the Lord. In addition, we are also stewards of the things that more obviously belong to God but which have been entrusted to us: Scripture, the knowledge of Jesus the Savior, creation. We are stewards of all those things and one day will give an account to the Lord for what we did with them.

In one of His parables, Jesus spoke of a master entrusting three servants with bags of gold (talents) according to their ability – five bags, two bags, and one bag (Matthew 25:14-30). In another parable, He spoke of each servant receiving the same amount (Luke 19:11-27). There are different ideas about what the master's assets represent, but the lessons are clear.

First, we are called to work, to make use of what God has given us, to be productive! Serving the Lord does not mean everyone needs to become a pastor! God's Word tells us, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord..." (Colossians 3:23). Whatever we do – selling real estate, raising children, running a business, etc. – we do it for the Lord and not merely to make life better for ourselves and our families. We seek to bring Him honor by all we do.

Secondly, we need to choose wisely how we will invest our lives and all God has given us. What will bring the most return for His Kingdom? What causes do we need to support financially? How can we share in spreading God's Word? Where should we volunteer our time? How are we benefitting other people? What and how much is the Lord calling each of us individually to do?

Thirdly, we will stand before the Lord (II Corinthians 5:10), and Jesus promised (and warned), "My reward is with Me, and I will give to each person according to what they have done" (Revelation 22:12). It is our faithfulness to do what He has asked us to do, with whatever He has given us, that will be rewarded – faithfulness even in the insignificant, "very small matter" (Luke 19:17). Those who opted out of faithful stewardship due to fear or to a desire to live only for themselves will lose out on a reward. The reward? Greater opportunities to serve the Lord for all eternity!

Lord, what I once called "mine," I now acknowledge as Yours. Teach me to use Your gifts wisely.

WEEK FOUR

A LIFE-LONG CHALLENGE TO TAKE ON

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION AND/OR PERSONAL REFLECTION

Open in prayer

Get acquainted time Tell the group in two or three sentences about a challenge you recently took on and completed or one you are currently tackling.

Group discussion/Personal reflection questions

1. Which one of this week's six devotions caught your interest the most? Why that one?
2. Day 1. Paul chose running a race as an appropriate sport to depict the Christian life. What sport would you choose to illustrate Christian life or some aspect of it? Explain why you chose the one you did?
3. Day 1. J. Vernon McGee, in his right-to-the-point way, wrote (vol. 5, page 27), "My friend, if you are going to get a reward, then you had better get out on the racetrack and start moving." What is your reaction to his counsel? How do you feel about the idea of rewards in heaven?
4. Day 1. Hebrews 12:1-3 gives us three things to do to help us win the race. (Notice the highlighted phrases in the devotion for Day 1.) Which of the three do you find the hardest to do? What might help you?
5. Day 2. Have you given much thought to diet and exercise as spiritual disciplines? The devotion for this day gives three reasons for doing so. Which one stands out to you and why?
6. Day 2. *Perhaps a majority of people are not happy with their bodies – either with their appearance or because of physical ailments. Many of us feel ashamed of the way we look. Yet, we are asked to present our bodies to the Lord in Romans 12:1. Take time to do that right now. Talk to the Lord about your body and your feelings about it. It belongs to Him!*
7. Day 3. What do you think it means for believers in America today to deny ourselves and take up our cross? Has freedom of religion exempted us from cross-bearing?
8. Day 3. Some Christian leaders think that believers in America will soon face the kind of persecution other believers face in much of the world today – destruction of churches or personal property by people who are anti-Christian, targeted physical assault by Islamic terrorists, maybe imprisonment for standing up for biblical values. A recent study, according to *Decision Magazine* online (November 2024), reported nearly 1,000 anti-Christian hate crimes in France in 2023 and more than 700 in the United Kingdom. How prepared do you think we are to face that kind of persecution?
9. Day 3. *Be honest with yourself in answering these questions: Does Jesus truly have the Number One place in my life? Am I completely at His disposal? Would I die for Him?*

10. Day 4. If you have not done so, read Appendix D. God's Word (1 Peter 5:8) warns us to "Be alert" (vigilant, wide awake, on our guard) because "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." What can we do to remain alert?
11. Day 4. It has been said that the devil's most effective weapon against Christians is discouragement. Do you agree? Why or why not?
Some Christians have lost the battle with discouragement. How can we fight against it with success?
12. Day 4. *Go over some of your more persistent thoughts and emotions as of late, especially the negative ones. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you recognize any lies of the enemy. We easily recognize that temptations are from the enemy. We do not always recognize that our negative thoughts and emotions are often prompted by his lies. As you identify any lies, reject them in the Name of Jesus.*
13. Day 5. Our old nature has been "rendered powerless." [See Week Two, Day 2's devotion.] It still seeks to exert itself and make its desires felt, thus making it seem like an uphill effort to be doers of God's Word. What can help us to say no to the old nature and yes to obedience to God's Word, even in the smallest matters?
14. Day 6. What are some of the factors that figure into decisions regarding the stewardship of our time, wealth, and abilities? One day, each one of us will stand before Jesus and give an account of our stewardship. How much does that influence your decisions about your own stewardship? Share your answer with the group if you feel comfortable in doing so.
15. Day 6. From Jesus' parables in Matthew 25:14-30 and Luke 19:11-27, we see that any rewards we will gain include greater service in His Kingdom. That means we will have jobs to do and responsibilities in eternity. We will *not* be sitting on clouds, strumming harps! How do you feel about that? Relieved? Disappointed? Frightened? Curious?
16. *What is one thing you think the Lord wants you to learn and apply to your life as a result of seeing the challenges you face as a believer?*

Prayer requests Share with the group any needs for which you would like the members of your group to pray during the week. Share, too, any answers to prayer for which you want to thank the Lord.

Close in prayer Use Psalm 145 as your closing prayer, remembering the Lord's greatness as we face the challenges before us. Then close with the Lord's Prayer.

THE CHURCH

When a fire destroyed a lovely church in Hawaii years ago, a reporter asked the pastor how he felt about his church burning down. The pastor answered, “The church did not burn down. Only the building burned. The church is the people. The church is alive and well.” Indeed, nowhere in the New Testament is the church merely a structure made of dead materials.

The Greek word for church is *ekklēsia*. It was a common word and referred to an assembly of people coming together for some purpose. Its literal meaning was “to call out” as in calling people out of their homes to a specific gathering, usually civic or religious in nature.

In the New Testament, *ekklēsia* takes on new meaning as **the community Jesus Christ is forming, calling people to come out of the world and to Himself. Everyone who believes in Him as their Savior and Lord is a member of that community**, the universal church made up of Christians in every country of the world. The church is also each of the congregations organized in various locales. Actually, wherever and whenever a group of Christians come together to worship, to study God’s Word, and to fellowship, there is the church.

Jesus Christ, the night before His death, prayed for His followers (John 17). Although He did not use the word “church,” it is clear that His church was on His mind. Among Jesus’ various requests, He mentioned one thing three times: **“that they may be one as we are one”** (v.11, v.21, v.22). The Nicene Creed acknowledges that unity: “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.”

This unity did not come easily. In the church’s earliest days, there were divisions in the church at Jerusalem between the Hellenistic Jews and the Hebraic Jews (Acts 6). They also faced the challenge of the Gentile converts (Acts 15). In spite of such ongoing struggles, each believer is united with Christ and therefore, with one another. **“The communion of saints...is real, and it transcends every conceivable boundary – geographic, denominational, racial, cultural, and socioeconomic. There already is a spiritual unity of all the saints...wrought by the Holy Spirit...”**⁴⁷ Galatians 3:26-28 expresses that oneness in Christ.

Until believers are together in heaven, we will prefer different worship styles. We will not baptize or celebrate Holy Communion in the same way. We will differ on various theological points. We will vote for different political candidates. But as believers, we all belong to Jesus Christ, and that makes us one. **We must never regard any fellow believer with disdain.** Like it or not, we are all part of the one church. And we had better like it because it is Jesus Christ who has built His church, called each member, and wants to see us “brought to complete unity” (John 17:23).

In “one holy catholic and apostolic Church,” **catholic means universal.** Christians imprisoned in Iran for witnessing. Christians meeting secretly in house churches in China. Christians in India persecuted by the Hindu majority. Christians in Nigeria harassed by the Islamic State. Our prayers must include our brothers and sisters around the world, suffering for their faith in Jesus. “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it” (I Corinthians 12:26). We are one with them and must not forget them but help them as we are able. We are the church.

Lord, thank You for including me in such a vast, amazing community of those who belong to You.

THE “BRETHREN” -- BROTHERS AND SISTERS IN CHRIST

There are two things, it is said, that cannot be done alone: to be married and to be a Christian. As believers, we are part of the same community called the church. We share an even closer relationship as **members of the same household – “God’s household”** (I Timothy 3:15) – and as **members of the same family – “the family of believers”** (Galatians 6:10).

The word translated “brethren” (NKJV) is used almost 200 times in the New Testament. “The brethren” was a designation given to believers. The NIV often translates the same word as “brothers and sisters” as in “Listen, my dear brothers and sisters...” (James 2:5). Please note that this is a close *nuclear* family – all siblings! No cousins, aunts, uncles, or in-laws!

The early church enjoyed a special esprit de corps described in the book of Acts. It was called *koinōnia*, a Greek word generally translated fellowship. Koinonia is meant to be the experience of all believers today as well. The practice of koinonia is also described in the nearly fifty “one another” commands in the New Testament. “Honor one another” (Romans 12:10). “Forgive one another” (Colossians 3:13). “Serve one another” (Galatians 5:13). “Be kind and compassionate to one another” (Ephesians 4:32). Encourage one another (Hebrews 10:25). Sharing one’s material goods was a crucial part of koinonia. While the rule was that anyone “unwilling to work shall not eat” (II Thessalonians 3:10), believers were to share with the needy among them (I John 3:17).

Many verses command us to love one another. In fact, Jesus Himself told us: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34). “As I have loved you” is a tall order, but in the church family, **no one is ever to feel alone or as if no one cares. Each member of the family is to feel accepted, appreciated, loved.** Even people from a secular perspective realize relationships are where we find true joy: “True happiness is collective. It is the experience of being connected to others, of participating in relationships of mutuality, of knowing yourself to be a needed and useful part of a greater whole.”⁴⁸

In a large congregation, such relationships are a challenge, especially for members uninvolved beyond weekly worship. In smaller study or service groups that meet regularly, people can develop strong relationships. As members grow to know each other, they feel free to share their joys and sorrows, hopes and disappointments. When apart, they pray for one another. If any member is in need in any way, the others are there for that one. That is koinonia; it’s *family*.

The devil is not in Las Vegas, Pastor J. Vernon McGee claimed. “Why would he want to fight his own crowd?” Instead he is in the church, trying to spread discord and gossip and split the family apart.⁴⁹ We need to be on our guard against such things! Too many churches have fallen victim.

In our human families we may not love all our relatives to the same degree, but we join with them for special occasions or holidays *because we are family*. We find that some of our relatives might have annoying quirks or bizarre opinions, but we overlook them *because we are family*. There are things we do for family that we wouldn’t do for others. That’s what even imperfect families do. How much more should we of God’s household commit to each other *because we are family*.

Lord, I want to see my brothers and sisters in a new light, to love them as You love them and me.

THE BODY OF CHRIST

God's Word uses a metaphor to describe the relationship believers share that is even closer than family relationships: we are all part of one body. We can't get closer to each other than that! We are the body of Christ, a picture used in Romans 12:3-8, I Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4:11-16. Like the word "church," the "body of Christ" can mean both the one universal church or the local congregation. **The metaphor is one that stresses both the unity of the church and its diversity.**

Every human being has one body, obviously, that is made up of many parts. Arms, ears, lungs, a stomach, toes, a heart – some 30 trillion cells, each with its own function! Some persons might be missing a part or two, and yet the rest of the parts come together to make one body. Likewise, all the members of the church form one body, but each member is different from the others.

The Bible uses the body of Christ imagery to point out that the Holy Spirit has given us different gifts and different functions within the church. **Every single one of us is gifted!** The Bible is clear on that (I Corinthians 12:7, 11). Paul, in his listing of the gifts, did not name the same gifts in each list, indicating that they were not exhaustive lists. God has given many gifts to believers that are not named in the Bible. There may well be thousands of gifts the Spirit has distributed that we could not name but which believers are using to serve the Lord and His church! Who would have guessed fifty years ago that computer savviness would be a gift God would give to some believers!

Every believer has at least one gift, and therefore each of us is called by God to use that gift in some way "for the common good" (I Corinthians 12:7), to build each other up (Ephesians 4:12). As Christ's body, we use those gifts to honor Him and to continue His work. "It is through the church that Jesus Christ acts. It must be hands to work for Him, feet to run upon His errands, a voice to speak for Him."⁵⁰ We can only accomplish that by each one fulfilling their part.

Every gift is significant though not always obvious. Each ministry someone takes on is important whether seen or not. We can't see our liver and we seldom think about it, but we can't live without it! Countless believers engage in intercessory prayer for others but remain unknown until we will discover in heaven how much was accomplished through their prayers. Service is a necessary gift but not always acknowledged. The ability to encourage others or to show mercy are also gifts that have tremendous impact though usually little visibility (Romans 12:8).

There is no room for a competitive spirit or for jealousy. Nor for bitterness if our work is not sufficiently recognized. We are not to put our own self-interests above the interests of Jesus for His church and His kingdom. Once when a pitcher for the L. A. Dodgers was taken out of the game, he was asked about its effect on his own career. He replied that it's important to remember that **you are playing for the name on the front of your uniform, not the name on the back**, i.e. for the team and not for your own glory. We serve not ourselves but Jesus and His Kingdom.

Unsure what your gift might be? Ask the Lord to show you. Then talk to people who know you well. They may see gifts in you that you have not yet realized. Or try out a few new activities; you may discover a gift and a joy in an area as of yet unexplored by you! Because you *are* gifted!

Lord Jesus, show me ways that I have not yet seen in which I can use my gifts for You!

LIVING STONES IN GOD'S TEMPLE

The church is a family and it is the body of Christ. In yet another metaphor, the church is often called a building, God's building (I Corinthians 3:9), God's Temple (I Corinthians 3:16). Individually, believers are temples of the Holy Spirit who indwells each one of us (I Corinthians 6:19).

Collectively, we make up God's Temple (Ephesians 2:19-21). While God is omnipresent, His presence on earth filled the old Tabernacle (Exodus 25:8-9; 40:34) and centuries later, the Temple in Jerusalem (II Chronicles 5:13-14). **Now *the church is His Temple, His dwelling place on earth (Ephesians 2:22), the place through which God continues to reveal Himself to the world.***

The stones that make up this Temple are alive. When Jesus first mentioned His church, He said, "I will *build* My church" (Matthew 16:18), but He was not referring to a physical building but to a community of people. **Each believer is like a brick, a "living stone"** (I Peter 2:5), whom Jesus is using to build His church. In this metaphor, our individuality is downplayed; our unity is foremost.

We are also helping to build this Temple! Paul spoke of our building each other up (Romans 15:2; I Thessalonians 5:11). An older English word for "to build up" is "to edify," from the same root word as edifice, a building. We are to strengthen one another spiritually, to help each other grow. "...when we come together as a congregation, it is both to be edified and to edify. In this respect, God's building is unlike any other that we have seen because it actually builds itself."⁵¹ In other words, **spiritual growth is not strictly a personal, private matter; we are to help each other grow.**

The most important part of constructing a building is its foundation, and the most important part of the foundation in biblical times was its cornerstone. Jesus pointed to Himself as the cornerstone (Matthew 21:42). A cornerstone was the first stone set in the construction of a masonry foundation, and its position determined the position of the entire structure. All the other stones were placed in reference to the cornerstone which also bore much of the weight of the building's outer structure. Clearly that is an accurate picture of Jesus in relation to His church!

While the church is built on Jesus Christ (I Corinthians 3:11), the apostles and prophets are also foundational (Ephesians 2:20), but not personally. Their teachings and doctrines, inspired by the Holy Spirit and set forth in Scripture, form the foundation. The church is built on the Word of God.

"We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church." "Apostolic" means the church's beliefs go back to the apostles' teachings as we have them in the Bible. Teachings put forth by leaders, denominations, or churches must always be tested by Scripture, and we must reject any ideas that do not pass the test of agreement with God's Word. A church where the authority of the Bible is questioned – and there are many -- has erected itself on a weak foundation and will eventually fall. **Building a church on anything except Christ and Scripture is building on sand (Matthew 7:21-27).**

The church is still under construction. Jesus is adding new living stones every day. We also join Him in reaching out to others to bring them into the church. Not until Jesus Christ returns will the building be complete. It might *seem* to be declining in some places, but in other spots around the world – even in surprising places like Iran and in locations purposely kept secret – it is flourishing!

Lord God, give to all believers a genuine concern for the spiritual strength of one another.

WORSHIPERS

As the temple of God, the church's first priority is worship. All else in which the church is involved must flow from its life of worship. Worship is the way we minister to the Lord. Indeed, Jesus announced that **the Father is seeking worshipers – but only a certain kind** (John 4:23).

The Lord once denounced Israel's worship: "These people come near to Me with their mouth and honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me" (Isaiah 29:13). Worship that merely "goes through the motions" is unacceptable to the Lord. Worship that focuses on the external forms without engaging the heart is likewise unsatisfactory in God's sight. As one pastor noted, "We must see that the real question in worship is not, 'What will meet my need?' The real question is, 'What kind of worship does God call for?'"⁵²

Thus, Jesus went on to explain that God's worshipers "must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:24 NKJV). The worship God wants is that which comes from our inner selves – our spirits – and fully engages our hearts, i.e. our desires, our will, and our emotions. We stand in awe of God. We express our love for Him. We offer our lives to Him. We acknowledge His claims on us. We bring Him our needs. The NIV reads, "worship in Spirit and in truth," with a capital S, and that is also true. Only worship prompted by the Holy Spirit is true worship. Thus, it is believers in Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who are uniquely enabled to offer worship befitting the Lord.

To worship in truth is to worship with the intellect as well as the heart. It is worship based on the truth about God set forth in Scripture. We praise the Lord for who He is and what He is like, i.e. His attributes: loving, omnipotent, wise, just, all-knowing, compassionate, faithful, good, etc. We thank the Lord for all He has done for us. In "truth" also implies we worship God in complete honesty, being open to Him and not attempting to conceal anything from Him or from ourselves.

While individually we can and should offer the Lord worship every day, **corporate worship – the worship of the church meeting together – has always been the norm for believers** from the early days of the church (Acts 2:46-47). Hebrews 10:25 scolds believers who are absent from worship. Even in nations where Christians are persecuted, they continue to worship *together* secretly, as best they can, in spite of the danger. Even if we feel like staying at home, our place is with our church family, standing together in the presence of the Lord we love. Our lives and our time belong to one another and to the Lord. Even if no one else notices our absence, the Lord will.

In the Old Testament, sacrifice was always part of worship. The emphasis was not on the cost, but on expressing devotion to the Lord. No one was to appear before the Lord empty-handed (Deuteronomy 16:16-17). **Bringing an offering was an act of reverence, homage, and adoration.** It still is. Christians offer "a sacrifice of praise" (Hebrews 13:15). In addition, making a monetary offering (II Corinthians 9:7) is an act of worship. We give *to the Lord*, not to pay the bills.

When we worship, it is not the pastor and choir trying to entertain the congregation. It is the pastor and entire congregation on stage, so to speak, for **an audience of One: the Triune God.** Come rested and ready to participate fully with the brethren, worshiping in spirit and in truth!

Lord God, You are truly worthy of our worship. We want to be the kind of worshipers You seek!

SOJOURNERS

An old story tells of a man who travelled to Israel to meet with a famous rabbi. On entering the rabbi's home, he noticed that there was almost no furniture. He asked, "Rabbi, where is all your furniture?" The rabbi responded, "Where is yours?" "Well, surely you know I am only passing through your country," to which the rabbi said, "So am I."

"Only passing through" captures the essence of a Christian's life in this world. Peter addressed the believers "as sojourners and exiles" (I Peter 2:11 ESV). The Greek word meaning sojourners has been translated into English as strangers, aliens, and foreigners, but the meaning is the same. We are temporary residents in a place not our home. Jesus explained to His disciples, "...you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world" (John 15:19). The world is not our home even though we are living here for now. Heaven is our home.

God's Word commands us to keep ourselves from "being polluted by the world" (James 1:27). We are not to conform "to the pattern of this world" (Romans 12:2). We are warned, "Do not love the world or anything in the world" (I John 2:15). The "world" in these verses does not mean the earth and creation, nor does it mean the people living in the world as we are to love even our enemies. **The "world" is a particular culture, a system whose standard operating procedures are warped by sin, alienated from God, and "under the control of the evil one"** (I John 5:19). Its ideas, values, priorities, and aims oppose God – or ignore Him – and flout His laws and His will.

When foreigners live in a nation not their own, they often seek to maintain the culture of their homeland. They sometimes prefer to live in small communities composed of people who share their ethnicity, speak their native language, eat the same foods. That should be true of Christians as well. **Given our citizenship is in the Kingdom of God, each congregation is a community that ought to be distinct from the prevailing culture of darkness around it, as different as night and day.** As "foreigners" here, Christians will often be hated because we *are* different (John 15:18-21), but if we are too "at home" in the world, we forfeit friendship with the Lord (James 4:4).

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, set forth the values of His Kingdom, our home. Service and sacrifice, prayer and the pursuit of righteousness, sexual purity, trust in the Father for our needs, love for both friends and foes – these describe the culture of "one *holy* catholic and apostolic church." Holy carries the meaning of "set apart," and thus, different. We do not live in isolation, however. We do not cut ourselves off from the society Jesus told us we are to influence. [See Week Six.] I Peter 2:11-17 briefly instructs us on how to live in the world as sojourners.

Because we are sojourners, Jesus taught that acquiring "treasures on earth" is not nearly so important as storing up "treasures in heaven" (Matthew 6:19-21). The former can be easily lost and will eventually disappear while the latter will last forever. Binh and Thanh serve Jesus in Viet Nam. In one area where they served, police often raided their worship services. The worshipers were fined, but many of them were students and unable to pay. Binh and Thanh sold their belongings and did menial labor to help pay the students' fines.⁵³ Binh and Thanh know they are only sojourners here, and their real treasures, which will be many, are safe in heaven.

Lord Jesus, You were in the world but not of it [John 17:14-16]. Help me to live as a sojourner.

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION AND/OR PERSONAL REFLECTION

Open in prayer

Get acquainted time Nowadays, people are much less likely to remain members of one Christian denomination for their entire life. If that is true of you, tell the group to which denominations you have belonged *without evaluating their strengths and weaknesses, please!* Simply name them.

Group discussion/Personal reflection questions

1. Which one of this week's six devotions caught your interest the most? Why that one?
2. Day 1. If you were to move out of state, what would be the three main things you would look for in a new church home?
3. Day 1. "Adiaphora" refers to church practices that are neither commanded nor forbidden in the Bible, e.g. displaying an American flag in the church sanctuary. Why is it crucial for Christians to distinguish between what is adiaphora and what is not?
4. Day 2. How does membership in the church differ from membership in every other organization or club – at least in theory? What could we do that would help us to live out our uniqueness, our koinonia?
5. Day 2. Romans 12:9-21 gives several characteristics of the way Christians ought to relate to one another within each congregation. Which ones do you think are our congregation's strong points? Which need improving?

In your own life, which characteristics are your own strong points? Which need improving?

6. Day 3. A person might have a natural gift to become a great pianist, pitcher, painter, or whatever, but until that person sits down at a piano, picks up a baseball, or takes brush in hand, the gift is dormant. Once discovered, years of practice might be required for that gift to truly shine and be recognized. How does this relate to God's granting us gifts to use in His service? (And the Bible says, *every one of us is gifted* by the Lord in some way.)
7. Day 3. What gifts do you see in action among Christians whom you know – gifts that clearly have been given to them by God to be used in His service but ones that may not be mentioned in the Bible?
8. Day 3. *What gift(s) do you think the Lord has given to you? Talk with Him about those gifts and how you are using or should be using them to serve Him. If you are not sure what gifts you have, ask Him to help you discover what they are.*
9. Day 4. When have you been "edified" (strengthened, built up) by another member of the church? Tell the group about your experience.

10. Day 4. Jesus prayed that His Church would be one (John 17), yet the Reformation in the 16th century caused a major split in the Christian Church, one that still exists. Why do you think the Protestants considered such a split to be justified?
11. Day 5. What parts of the worship service enable you to truly enter into the experience of worshipping the Lord? Or that help you to experience His presence?
12. Day 5. The Psalms mention clapping, raising hands, shouting as part of worship. King David, in his worship, danced before the Lord. Do you think we allow our “reserve” or our “sophistication” to hold us back from a fuller expression of worship? Do you think the Lord is impressed by our “dignity”? Why or why not?
13. Day 5. After a worship service, why is “What did I contribute to the worship today?” a better question to ask than, “What did I get out of worship today?”
14. Day 6. In what ways or at what times have you felt like a “sojourner” on this earth? Try to think of a specific example and share it with the group.
15. Day 6. *Take a personal inventory in the next week. How do I use any money left after the bills are paid? What occupies my thoughts much of the time? What do I consider absolute necessities? Whose company do I enjoy? How do I spend my leisure time? Whom do I admire? What are my current goals? After asking yourself those questions or others, see how your answers align with the values Jesus expressed in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). Do your answers reflect His values or the world’s way of thinking?*
16. *What is one thing you think the Lord wants you to learn and apply to your life as a result of understanding the family relationships in the church that we have been given?*

Prayer requests Share with your group any needs for which you would like the members of your group to pray during the week. Share, too, any answers to prayer for which you want to thank the Lord.

Close in prayer During your time of prayer, allow whoever wishes to pray aloud to do so, one at a time, with different group members praying in a sentence or two for our congregation, for the pastors and staff members, and for the different ministries of the church. Someone might also include a prayer for Christians in other nations who are persecuted for their faith. Other group members can pray silently. After everyone who wants to pray aloud has done so, close with the Lord’s Prayer.

SLAVES OF CHRIST

Slavery is repulsive to us, as well it should be, given the history of our nation. Millions of people, however, lived as slaves in the Roman Empire, and the depiction of believers as the slaves of Christ stands out in the Bible. That is not always clear to us because often the Greek word, *doulos*, is translated “servant” to avoid offending our sensibilities. The word, however, means a slave.

Before we explore what that means for us, **we need to look first at Jesus. In His coming to earth, God’s Word tells us, the Son of God “made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant” – a *doulos*, a slave – (Philippians 2:7).** On the night before His death, Jesus wrapped a towel around His waist, the symbol of a slave, and then washed His disciples’ feet, a job performed only by slaves or sometimes by children or women. When He finished, He explained that a servant (*doulos*) is not greater than his master and that we must follow His example (John 13:14-16).

The Apostle Paul called himself and Timothy “slaves of Christ” (*douloi*, plural) in Philippians 1:1. Christians who were slaves were *primarily* to be slaves of Christ (Ephesians 6:6). Christians who were free persons were also Christ’s slaves (I Corinthians 7:22). Because Jesus bought us with His blood (I Corinthians 6:19-20), we *belong* to Him, but at the same time, we have been made children of God and have been set free (Galatians 4:6-7). **We take on the role of “slaves of Christ” in gratitude to Him, and in serving others, we are following His example as He told us to do.**

Jesus calls us to render selfless service to others. “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve...” (Mark 10:45). Here the Greek word for “to serve” is from *diakonos*, an attendant, like a waitress or messenger. It is also translated servant or deacon. Because we are Christ’s slaves (*doulos*), we are servants (*diakonos*) of believers and unbelievers alike.

Jesus, our example, let Himself be interrupted by others in need, e.g., a blind man (Mark 10:46-52). Jesus responded to society’s outcasts – a leper (Luke 5:12-13), an unclean woman (Luke 8:43-48), a sinner (Luke 7:37-48), a man who likely had cheated his countrymen (Luke 19:1-10). Jesus took time to minister to children (Mark 10:13-16). He is the Good Shepherd, seeking the lost and those who needed Him (e.g. John 5:14; 9:35). Jesus did not seek to please Himself, but only the Father who sent Him (John 5:30). Jesus was so exhausted ministering to the sick well into the night that He fell asleep the next day in a boat in the middle of a storm (Matthew 8:16-27).

Slaves are at the “beck and call” of their masters, meaning they were constantly listening for his call and watching for any silent signal. Likewise, we need to be attentive to Jesus, ready to act as servants whenever He beckons. Obedience to Jesus Christ is of greater importance than our own plans. We are His willing slaves; our freedoms have been surrendered to Him. We can ask the Lord each morning to bring to mind the people who need us that day and how we can best serve them. It is well to pay attention to the people who cross our paths; it might not be accidental!

Jesus tells us we will be blessed – the Greek word is “happy” – if we serve as He did (John 13:17). It is the one who serves who is great in the Kingdom of God (Mark 10:43). Jesus’ slaves (*douloi*) are the ones who will serve Him and will reign with Him forever and ever (Revelation 22:3-5)!

Lord, direct me, send me, use me, command me as You please. I belong to You.

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

No believer wants to miss out on God's purpose for his or her life. "What is the will of God for my life?" is a question Christians ask. While the specifics differ from one person to another, the Bible clearly sets forth God's will in general for His children. As Christ's servants, we must begin with the Bible's directives, and as we are obedient to do what we already know is His will, the Lord will reveal to us personally more of His specific, individual purposes for us.

Jesus, who declared, "I am the Light of the world," gave us that same mission when He said to His followers, **"You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). He went on to instruct us to let our light shine, and He explained that we do this through our good deeds (Matthew 5:16).** In fact, **we were "created in Christ Jesus to do good works"** (Ephesians 2:10). Since Christ has redeemed us, we are to be *eager* to do good deeds and *"careful to engage in good deeds"* (Titus 2:14; 3:8 NASB)! Our good deeds are spiritual sacrifices, pleasing to God (Hebrews 13:16).

Protestants on occasion have misunderstood the Reformation's doctrine of justification by faith alone, assuming that good works are not important since we know we are not saved by our works. While our good deeds do not save us, they are an essential part of Christian life. James 2:14-24 makes it very clear that **true faith reveals itself in good deeds** without which faith is dead.

Jesus, in the Parable of the Sheep and Goats (Matthew 25:31-46), gave examples of good deeds: feeding the hungry, providing water for the thirsty, welcoming strangers, giving clothes to the needy, taking care of the sick, visiting those imprisoned. Obviously His list was not exhaustive! Doing yard work for a disabled neighbor or helping a child learn to read are only two examples of individual ways we can help. Collectively, Christians are providing wells in Africa, building low cost homes for the homeless, and assisting financially with disaster relief. The list goes on and on.

To our amazement, when we do a good deed for someone, Jesus says we have done it for Him (Matthew 25:40). One Bible scholar went so far as to say, "In our Christian fellowship and in the world around us, **Christ has given us the poor and needy that we may show in them what we would like to do for Him if He were on the earth**" (emphasis added).⁵⁴ If we truly believed that, we would be standing in line to serve meals at St. Vincent de Paul! Who would not want to be there, serving, if we knew Jesus would be among those served that day!!

Our good deeds are a witness to the world. Unbelievers can be drawn to the Lord by our good deeds (I Peter 2:12). The organization, Jews for Jesus, reports that the support Christians have given to Israel is recognized. "We want you to know that...the people of Israel are noticing the love and support of Christians; they are like rays of light in these dark times. There are many Israelis who are open to reading the New Testament because of Christians who demonstrate their love for Israel."⁵⁵ While witnessing is usually thought to mean with words, our deeds also bear witness to the love of Jesus. In fact, it is our good deeds that earn us the right to be heard.

One word of caution: we do these for the glory of God! So let's not resent it if we're not thanked. Let's not do anything out of the desire for admiration. Let's let go of the need to be praised.

Lord, open my eyes to local needs and needs around the world to which I can respond for You.

THE SALT OF THE EARTH

Salt was an extremely valuable commodity in biblical times. Besides being a flavor enhancer, salt is a preservative. Before refrigeration, food was covered with salt to keep it from spoiling. Salt is also a natural cleansing antiseptic. The saltsuite.com notes that for thousands of years, salt has been used to treat wounds and inflammation – painful but somewhat effective.

Jesus used the title “salt of the earth” to point out the influence His followers are to exercise.

The world – society, culture – is in a state of increasing moral decay. “Salt” is needed to stop the decay or, at the least, to slow it down. God once told Israel, “Your wound is incurable, your injury beyond healing” (Jeremiah 30:12). That same statement could be made to the whole world today. “Salt” is needed for the world’s wounds. And Jesus said we are that salt.

The world’s values continue to drag society toward destruction. What does the world value? Spirituality without God’s demands. Sexual freedom. The acquisition of wealth and goods. One’s own individual rights. Knowledge devoid of God. Power and control. Popularity. Being first. Personal happiness. Many of these secular aspirations come at the expense of other people, and those who lose out under such a system are pitied -- unless they stand in the way of one’s getting what one wants. Charity is admired as long as it is not too demanding. After all, in this world’s system, it is still the survival of the fittest. The world still idolizes the people with the most toys.

“The world cannot hate you,” Jesus once told his brothers, “but it hates Me because I testify that its works are evil” (John 7:7). **Jesus lived as the salt of the earth, setting forth the values of His Kingdom against those of the world. His words were like salt on the world’s wounds, but the truth can hurt. The world rejected Him and put Him on a cross.** Jesus warned His disciples, “If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you” (John 15:19).

If the church keeps to itself, it is tolerated. As long as Christians keep quiet, they can be popular. But speak out when a co-worker tells a racially insensitive joke, and popularity wanes. Refuse to go along with questionable business practices, and one’s job is in danger. Speak up for biblical family values, and be labeled narrow-minded. Give aid to an illegal immigrant, and be reviled.

On the other hand, the manner in which we act as the salt of the earth matters a lot! Acting self-righteously – “holier than thou” – is hardly what Jesus had in mind. He condemned the Pharisees for that! Moreover, **our integrity has to back up the values we assert, or we lose all credibility. Love and good deeds should characterize everything we do. But so should courage.**

The salt of Jesus’ day was from the area of the Dead Sea and was not pure. Air and heat would eventually leach the saltiness out. Then it was thrown out. Jesus cautioned us not to allow the world to do the same to us, making us “no longer good for anything” (Matthew 5:13). If we become too much like the world – enjoying all the same things, adopting the same goals, pursuing all the same interests – we will have lost any influence we once had. As far as Jesus is concerned, although we will still be saved, we will no longer be of any use to Him or His Kingdom. God forbid!

Lord, give me courage to speak and act whenever, wherever the salt of Your Kingdom is needed.

PRIESTS

In the time of Moses, the Lord chose the tribe of Levi to serve Him in regard to worship at the Tabernacle and later, at the Temple in Jerusalem. Only Levitical priests could enter the Temple's Holy Place, and only the High Priest (a descendant of Aaron) could enter the Holy of Holies, i.e. the Most Holy Place, and then only once a year. Only the priests could offer to the Lord the sacrifices brought by the people. **Thus the priests were to represent the people before God, and they were to stand for God before the people**, bringing His word of forgiveness and His blessing to them (Numbers 6:22-27). The priests were **mediators, a bridge, between the Lord and His people**.

After His Ascension, **Jesus was appointed our High Priest and the only Mediator** between God and humanity (Hebrews 4:14-16; I Timothy 2:5). Hebrews 5-10 describes that role of Christ in detail. Entry to the Most Holy Place, however, is no longer forbidden to all but the High Priest. Jesus opened a way for all believers to enter the very presence of God (Hebrews 10:19-22).

The Lord has designated believers as "a royal priesthood" (I Peter 2:9). Jesus has made all who belong to Him priests to serve under His authority (Revelation 1:6). Martin Luther made the "priesthood of all believers" a central theme of his teaching. Indeed, the Protestant reformers rediscovered the truth that every believer can hear the Holy Spirit speak through Scripture, and every believer can approach the Lord in prayer and be heard. Pastors are trained to preach and administer the sacraments but are no closer to God than lay persons can be.

Like the priests of old, we are to bring the Lord to the people! We represent Jesus wherever we go. We bring light and salt to our world. We bring His message of grace. We speak of His love. We are to help unbelievers see the Lord. Someone once said that given Jesus is the bridge between humanity and God, we are like onramps to that bridge, guiding people to Jesus. We may not all be pastors, but we all can minister to someone who needs us.

We also represent humanity before the Lord. We do this through our prayers on their behalf. Believers have access to God the Father. We can come into His presence. And we do so carrying the needs and concerns of the people around us. We call that "**intercessory prayer.**"

God's Word instructs "that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people," including those in authority, i.e. rulers, elected officials (I Timothy 2:1). The "all people" means anyone in need of our prayers whether the victims of a disaster or the neighbor in the hospital, atheists or fellow believers, persecuted believers and their persecutors. **As priests, we pray for those whom the Lord places on our hearts and for those who ask for our prayers.**

We do not always know how to pray because we don't always know what is best nor can we always comprehend God's plan. We can, however, always pray that people will come to trust in Jesus and that the Holy Spirit will work in their lives. We can pray that the Lord's purposes will be achieved in the world, in our nation, and in the lives of those for whom we pray. We can pray that their needs will be met and that they will see the Lord's hand in meeting those needs. And when our words fail us, we can trust the Holy Spirit to pray through us as only He can (Romans 8:26).

Lord, what a privilege to be a priest! Grant me empathy for all the people for whom I intercede.

WITNESSES

It is sad that many of us are content with just being saved. We accept that each person has a personal responsibility to his or her soul and their choice has nothing to do with us. On the contrary – their choice has everything to do with us! **We are the instruments God uses to bring salvation to the lost. How can we be contented with being saved when our family, friends, and co-workers are not?**⁵⁶ (Emphasis added.)

Witnessing is a topic that makes many believers uneasy. We fear offending people. We are not sure what to say. We would hate to push people away from the Lord by our inept effort at describing what it means to be a Christian. We assume we do not know the Bible well enough. Maybe we are afraid of ridicule or hostility. (“Witness” is the Greek word *martus*, a martyr!)

When Jesus said, “You will be My witnesses” (Acts 1:8), He did not only mean the apostles. “This is a very personal command to each believer – personally, privately...It is a direct command for you and for me today. It is our business to get the Word of God out to the world.”⁵⁷ God is not going to miraculously bring unbelievers into churches to hear about Jesus without our invitation. Even *with* an invitation, many of them will not come. That means **they need to hear of Jesus from us.**

The Greek word for “to witness” – *martureō* -- is the same word that is also translated “to testify.” We share our experiences. We tell our stories. J. Vernon McGee told of one businessman who, every time he heard someone use the name Jesus Christ in a blasphemous way, would gently say, **“I’d like to tell you what Jesus Christ means to me.”**⁵⁸ Witnessing is telling what Jesus means to us: what He did for us and how our lives are different because of Him.

If you have never put that into words, try doing so. Set aside some time to write out your own testimony. When it is clear to us the difference Jesus makes in our own lives personally, we will be better prepared and more confident about sharing it with another person when the occasion arises. Unbelievers may not welcome a talk on doctrine, but nearly everyone will be open to hear a person’s story, especially a story about what makes a difference in our lives and helps us to cope.

In fact, it is when we are enduring trials, dealing with problems, or facing tragedy, and are doing so with inner peace, that unbelievers are most receptive to hearing how we can do that. The Bible says, **“Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have”** (I Peter 3:15). Have your testimony ready! Someone may ask you, “I notice that you go to church on Sundays. What is it you believe?” We are to “know how to answer everyone” (Colossians 4:6). Have your answer all prepared! If someone asks you, as the jailer asked Paul, “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30), be ready to tell them! Suggesting they talk with a pastor is *NOT* the best answer! Most unbelievers would not do that.

Even without a word, our lives witness to our faith. Our attitudes, our actions, and the qualities of our character speak volumes, either honoring Jesus or demeaning Him. The Bible calls us “Christ’s ambassadors.” In all we do and say, we represent Jesus and His Kingdom and are to call people to be reconciled to God (II Corinthians 5:20). **The King of Kings commissioned us!** Let’s not fail Him!

Lord Jesus, You made me Your witness, Your ambassador. I do not want to fail You! Help me!

EMPOWERED

Believers are runners in a race, bearers of the cross, soldiers at war. We are slaves of Christ called to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth. We are designated priests and commissioned as witnesses. **How can we possibly fulfill that expansive an identity?! How can we even remember all that our identity in Christ entails? The answer is we cannot. Not on our own.**

On Easter evening, Jesus assured the disciples that they would soon be “clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). Moments before His ascension, Jesus again promised them, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you” (Acts 1:8). The Holy Spirit came upon them and other believers on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), transforming them into courageous and more-than-competent servants of Jesus Christ. That very day, Peter proclaimed that all who believe in Jesus, who repented, and were baptized, “will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38-39).

The Holy Spirit who lives within every believer in Jesus “is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20). The Holy Spirit can give us the words to speak when we are witnessing even if we are unaware of His working through us. The Holy Spirit can make us strong when we are weak (II Corinthians 12:10). The Holy Spirit can give us courage and boldness when we feel threatened or afraid (Acts 4:29-31).

“Be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18), and the verb tense means “keep on being filled.” Like a phone needing to be re-charged or a car needing to be re-fueled, believers cannot “run on empty.” We come to the Lord again and again confessing anything that would rob us of His power and asking to be filled anew with His Spirit. **We want to face each day in the power of the Holy Spirit!**

The Lord will equip us for whatever He calls us to do. “His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life...” (II Peter 1:3). Similarly, Hebrews 13:21 speaks of the Lord equipping us to do His will. The Greek word translated “equip” in that verse can also mean “to supply, to perfect, or to complete” and could be used to describe a king equipping his army before battle.

The Bible likewise equips and empowers us to live for God and to serve Him (II Timothy 3:16-17). For that reason, it is essential that we become familiar with Scripture – not simply our favorite Bible stories, but the “meat” of the Word (I Corinthians 3:1-2). Hebrews 5:11-6:2 scolds those who have been believers long enough that they should now be teaching others but instead, they have not yet progressed beyond the “elementary teachings about Christ.” The message is “Grow up!”

Jesus promised “Surely I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20). “If Jesus were standing beside us and said, ‘Come; go with Me,’ we would go wherever He led us. However, since we cannot see Him, we do not always live as if He is with us. But this is His promise...He is not merely present in our hearts, in our consciousness, or in our memories. He is really present. He is always with us.”⁵⁹

We have the power of the Spirit, the presence of Jesus, the resource of the Word of God. We can say with Paul, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13 NKJV).

We are empowered!

Lord God, You have given me all I need! May I always stand strong, be bold, and ready to serve!

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION AND/OR PERSONAL REFLECTION

Open in prayer

Get acquainted time In a sentence or two, tell the group about something good – big or small – that has happened in your life during these weeks of Lent. Be brief!

Group discussion/Personal reflection questions

1. Which one of this week's six devotions caught your interest the most? Why that one?
2. An old story tells of a rabbi in Russia who was discouraged and confused regarding his ministry and troubled by doubts. In his distraught state, he wandered into a restricted area. A guard demanded, "**Who are you? And what are you doing here?**" The rabbi looked at him and told him he would pay him well if every day that guard would ask him those same two questions. Why are those two questions crucial ones for Christians to hear every day as well?
3. Day 1. There are numerous opportunities to serve others – from visiting the lonely in nursing homes to advocating for the homeless or to listening to an associate unload about some hardship or problem. How do you determine what Jesus is calling you to do?
4. Day 2. Good deeds are to be done not merely for other Christians or "nice" unbelievers. Romans 12:19-21 calls on Christians to do good deeds for those who have treated us unfairly or cruelly. Have you ever tried that? What happened?

Can you think of any rather unpleasant person for whom you can do a good deed? Talk with the Lord about what you might do for that person and then do it this week or next.

5. Day 2. Neil Anderson (page 105) says the most embarrassing put-down for a Christian to hear is to have someone you have known for a year or two say, "I didn't know you were a Christian!" Why would that be embarrassing? Why *should* it be embarrassing? How should our lives and words keep that comment from ever being made about us?
6. Day 3. R. C. Sproul wrote (*Matthew*, page 77) that Christians are not to look at society and culture, wringing our hands and groaning about how bad things are becoming. We are to be proactive and slow, if not stop, that downward spiral. What could we be doing in American society/culture to slow the "downward spiral"? Come up with some practical examples. Or do you disagree with that picture of a downward spiral? Why or why not?

Similarly, William Barclay said (*Luke*, page 198), "The individual Christian must be the conscience of his fellows; and the church must be the conscience of the nation." What did he mean? If you agree, give some suggestions as to how we might be that?

7. Day 3. Go over the values of the world as set forth in the third paragraph. How do the values of Jesus, the values of the Kingdom of God, counter each one of those?

8. Day 4. Priests traditionally made sacrifices. I Peter 2:5 tells Christians that we as priests are to offer up “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God.” What would those spiritual sacrifices include? In what sense is intercessory prayer a sacrifice?
9. Day 4. *We cannot pray for every need in the world or for every needy individual. The Lord will place on our hearts those for whom He is asking us to pray. Some Christians have a nation or a people group for which they feel led to regularly pray. If He has not already done so, ask the Lord to give you specific needs or people as your own prayer assignment.*
10. Day 5. The evangelist Vance Havner (1901-1986) once said, “People do not come to Christ at the end of an argument. Simon Peter came to Jesus because Andrew [his brother] went after him with a testimony.” [See John 1:35-42.] How comfortable are you telling someone else your story about what Jesus means to you?
11. Day 5. *If you have not done so before now, take time this week to write out your testimony. You might include who Jesus is, what He has done for you, how your life is different because you are a believer, or simply what Jesus means to you. Don’t be afraid to quote the Bible. There is power in God’s Word that can even impact an unbeliever (Hebrews 4:12). When you have finished, share it with another believer. Then become so familiar with your testimony that you can share it with someone who is not a believer – yet.*
12. Day 5. There are books that help us to be witnesses for Jesus. [A few popular ones are *Out of the Salt Shaker and Into the World* by Rebecca Pippert; *Just Walk across the Room* by Bill Hybels; *The Case for Christ*, by Lee Strobel.] Have you read any of them or others? Tell the group about them.
13. Day 6. The Holy Spirit is sometimes called “the forgotten God.” How well do you know the Holy Spirit? On a scale of 1 to 10 with 1 being “I know He is a member of the Trinity” to 10 being “He is my daily guide and my source of power,” where would you place your experience of the Holy Spirit? How can we become more familiar with the Holy Spirit?
14. Day 6. *Ask the Lord to fill you with His Holy Spirit. (Not that you will receive more of Him, but He will have more of you!)*
15. Day 6. Has there been a time in your life when you were very aware of the Holy Spirit empowering you in some way for some purpose? If you can, tell the group about it.
16. *What is one thing you think the Lord wants you to learn and apply to your life as a result of seeing the mission in which you have a part?*

Prayer requests Share with the group any needs for which you would like the members of your group to pray. Share, too, any answers to prayer for which you want to thank the Lord.

Close in prayer Since this is your last session together, include a time of thanking the Lord for insights you may have gained and also for your fellow group members. And of course, thank the Lord for all that He has done and continues to do for us, especially for Jesus’ sacrifice on the Cross and His resurrection victory!

APPENDIX A: PREDESTINATION

The Bible clearly teaches predestination. [See Romans 8:29-30; Ephesians 1:4-5, 11.] The word predestination is the translation of a Greek word that means to foreordain, to decide beforehand, to mark out ahead of time. In the New Testament, it refers to God's choosing, before the creation of the world, those who would belong to Him and whom He would save.

The Reformers **John Calvin** and **Martin Luther** understood that predestination displays God's sovereignty. *God* chooses who will believe and be saved. Then God grants those people, the elect, His grace that enables them to respond to the Holy Spirit and believe. Since every single human being with the exception of Jesus Christ is on the way to hell, God showed His mercy in deciding to save some of them. The rest remain condemned – not because they were not chosen, but because their own sin warrants judgment.

Luther said predestination is a necessary doctrine “in order that our salvation may be taken entirely out of our hands and put in the hand of God alone.” Furthermore, he wrote that “predestination cannot fail, and no one can withstand Him...”⁶⁰ In other words, if God has predestined a person to salvation, that person cannot refuse because God is sovereign, and His will cannot be frustrated. Moreover, only God's grace makes a “yes” response possible since sin has rendered our free will incapable of choosing God on our own. Luther admitted that this might lead some to have a “secret anger against God.”⁶¹ To human thinking, that some people would be chosen and others not, when that choice had nothing to do with their own worthiness, clearly seems unfair. Paul addressed that issue in Romans 9.

Other theologians have pointed out that the Bible says God “wants *all* people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (I Timothy 2:4). Because God desires our *free response* of love for and trust in Him, He gave humanity free will, allowing people to accept or reject salvation. The choice is our responsibility. Thus, sinners are saved only when they voluntarily accept the gift of God's grace and believe in Jesus. This view is called **Arminianism**, named after Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609). Instead of “God chose me,” the Arminian emphasis is, “I chose God.”

Philip Melancthon (1497-1560), a colleague and successor of Luther, proposed the “prescient view of predestination” based on Romans 8:29. That verse states, “those God foreknew, He also predestined...” I Peter 1:2 also speaks of God's foreknowledge. Melancthon interpreted this to mean that **God knew beforehand – even before creation – which people would respond** to the Gospel and believe in Jesus. **These are the ones God then elected** and predestined to be His own. Many Christian leaders condemn this view for taking our salvation out of God's hands and making it subject to our own choices, thus making our salvation less secure. Nevertheless, this “prescient view” has become the dominant view in evangelical circles today.

Trying to be faithful to the whole truth of Scripture, Bible commentator, Warren Wiersbe, wrote:

A sinner “responds because God's grace makes him willing to respond. The mystery of divine sovereignty and human responsibility will never be solved in this life. Both are taught in the Bible. Both are true, and both are essential.”⁶²

Radio preacher J. Vernon McGee put it simply: **“Let's not argue about election. It's as simple as this: He calls, and you answer. If you have answered, you are among the elect, one of ‘the called of Jesus Christ.’”**⁶³ Perhaps the matter should be left at that!

APPENDIX B: HUDSON TAYLOR ON UNION WITH CHRIST

Hudson Taylor (1832 – 1905) was a British Baptist who founded the China Inland Mission and served as a missionary in China for over 50 years. In a letter to his sister, he described the struggles he had as he tried to serve Christ and his need for “more holiness, life, and power.” He wrote that he had “prayed, agonized, fasted, made resolutions, read the Word of God more diligently – but all was without effect.” He went on to say, “I felt assured there was in Christ all I needed, but the practical question was how was I to get it *out*?”

His “awakening” came when “the Spirit of God revealed the truth of our *oneness* with Jesus as I had never known it before.” He then focused on John 15 and told his sister, “As I thought of the Vine and the Branches, what light the blessed Spirit poured direct into my soul: I saw that not only would Jesus never leave me, but that I was a member of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones... My dear Sister, it is a wonderful thing to be really one with a risen and exalted Savior.”

In his letter, he went on to describe the difference this had made in his life and ministry. “The sweetest part is the rest which full identification with Christ brings. I am no longer anxious about anything...for He, I know, is able to carry out His will and His will is mine. It makes no matter where He places me or how. That is rather for Him to consider than for me. For the easiest positions, He must give me grace; and in the most difficult, His grace is also sufficient.

“It makes little difference to my servant whether I send him to buy a few cents worth of things or the most expensive articles. In either case, he looks to me for the money and brings me the purchases. So, if God places me in great perplexity, must He not give me much guidance; in positions of great difficulty, much grace; in circumstances of great pressure and trial, much strength? His resources are mine, for He is mine...*all this springs from the believer’s oneness with Christ.*

“I am no better than before...*but I am dead and buried with Christ—aye, and risen too and ascended;* and now Christ lives in me, ‘and the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.’ I now believe *I am dead to sin.* God reckons me so, and tells me to reckon myself so—and He knows best. All my past experience may have shown that it was not so; but dare I say it is not now, when He says it *is*? I feel and know that old things have passed away.

“I am as capable of sinning as ever, but Christ is realized as present as never before. He cannot sin and He can keep me from sinning. I cannot say (I am sorry to have to confess it) that since I have seen this light, I have not sinned; but I do feel that there was no need to have done so. And further—walking more in the light, my conscience has been more tender; sin has been instantly confessed and pardoned; and peace and joy (with humility) instantly restored...”

(The above is from Chapter 11: “A Typical Case,” *Bone of His Bone* by F. J. Huegel, contemporized edition. London: Harper Collins, 1994.)

What an amazing testimony affirming Jesus’ words: “You are in Me and I am in you.”

APPENDIX C: A PERSONAL TESTIMONY by JONI EARECKSON TADA

[Joni Eareckson Tada was left a quadriplegic in a diving accident in 1967. Wanting to help others with disabilities, she founded and is CEO of Joni and Friends, a Christian organization providing programs and services for thousands of special needs families around the world.]

My chronic pain makes my quadriplegia feel like a walk in the park.

People often ask how I manage my pain. Well, when its fangs sink deep into my hips and back, that's my signal. I begin deep breathing, slow and steady. And when fiery pain threatens to overtake me – just as the flames threatened to consume Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in that fiery furnace found in the book of Daniel – I have a conversation with it.

I don't say, "I can't stand this; it's killing me," because words like that are fraught with anxiety. Fear only makes things worse. Instead, I calmly ask Jesus to meet me in my pain, to not let it crush me. And the Son of God never fails to meet me, just as He met those three Hebrews in that hot furnace of fire. [See Daniel chapter 3.]

And what does Jesus say to me in that agonizing place? He comforts me with His own words. He will say something like, "Joni, My Spirit inspired 2 Corinthians 4:8 for a good reason. For although you 'are hard pressed on every side,' you will not be crushed."

Oh, what a promise! Pain may tighten its vise grip, but it cannot crush me. As I cling to Christ's promises, my pain pushes me further into His heart. There's nothing sweeter than finding my Savior in the middle of my hellish circumstances. It helps deflect the pain and helps me to suffer well. Jesus helps me be in that unhappy place well.

All the years I lived in my wheelchair, I never got delivered from pain. But I met my Deliverer in it. I didn't get healed, but I found intimate fellowship with the Healer.

Friend, pain does not have to crush you. As you courageously look at the stern countenance of pain and enter unafraid into its recesses, you will defang it of its terror. You'll see that the Lord is in your pain, having transfigured it to become a place of union with Him. Jesus conquered the insidious ways of pain and because of that, He's your prescription for pain – whether it's in your hip, your head, or your heart.

And remember, there is a Day coming when "He will wipe every tear from your eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain" (Revelation 21:4). Until then, when pain encroaches, start deep breathing and cling to a Bible promise. There are thousands to hold onto. Perhaps my favorite is this one uttered by Almighty God to you and me, promising, "I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you" (Isaiah 46:4b).

And He will. He promised.

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You are invited to visit Joni on her website: joniandfriends.org.

APPENDIX D: THE REALITY OF SPIRITUAL WARFARE

Scripture clearly teaches that we have unseen enemies. Jesus acknowledged the existence of the devil, whom He called “the prince of this world” (John 12:31). Jesus described him as an armed strong man guarding all that is his. Jesus, however, during His ministry “tied him up” and “plundered his house” (Mark 3:27; Luke 11:20-22). Thus we see Jesus setting free the demon-possessed (Matthew 8:16) and healing a woman whom Satan had kept bound for eighteen years (Luke 13:10-17). Jesus came to destroy the devil’s works (I John 3:8).

Satan had been an angel of the highest order (Isaiah 14:12-15). Sometime before Genesis 3, he declared war against God, and a third of the angels (often described as stars as in Revelation 1:20) joined him (Revelation 12:4, 7-9). They are now called **demons**, invisible spirit beings of various ranks named in Ephesians 6:12. For their sin, they are condemned to hell (II Peter 2:4) which was created for them (Matthew 25:41).

Dangerous and cruel, they remain powerful beings until their final judgment (Revelation 20:10). **They desire to destroy God’s work wherever they can and keep the nations of the world under their sway. Their goals are to keep persons from turning to the one, true God and to prevent believers from growing to maturity in Christ.**

While we do well not to underestimate them, neither the devil nor his demons are gods.

Neither Satan nor his minions are omnipresent, but there are a huge number of them. They are strong but not omnipotent. They are not all-knowing, but they are smart and very observant. They know humanity well and they know how to take advantage of our weaknesses. They watch us and manage to figure out our points of vulnerability and the best way to attack each one of us.

Their activities are numerous. The evangelist Billy Graham noted, “Satan and his demons are known by the discord they promote, the wars they start, the hatred they engender, the murders they initiate...”⁶⁴ The unseen war continues between the demonic powers (“the princes”) who are over the nations and God’s mighty angels, also called princes (Daniel 10). They spread chaos, corrupt moral standards, attempt to undermine Scripture, destroy marriages, incite persecution of Christians, and promote false religions. Wherever they can, they seek to control individuals even to the point of taking over their minds and actions, i.e. “possessing” them.

Christians cannot be “possessed” because we have the Holy Spirit living within us, but Christians can come under the influence of a demon presence if we are careless. This is called “oppression,” and it keeps us living in defeat and misery. That cannot happen unless we allow it in any number of ways. Willfully continuing to practice sin (versus “slipping up”) will do it! If we are not staying close to the Lord, speaking with Him daily, or if we have separated ourselves from Christian worship and fellowship, then we are vulnerable. Drugs or anything that we allow to dull our control opens us to control from “outside.” Indulging in the occult is an invitation to the demonic! Believing the lies of the devil about God or the people around us also makes us an easy target.

If you think you might be oppressed, go to Jesus! He can set you free!

It is dangerous to underestimate the enemy, but it is foolish to overestimate him. Satan and his forces are already defeated. Jesus Christ won the decisive victory on the cross, disarming those powers (Colossians 2:15). **God remains sovereign, and nothing will ultimately frustrate His purposes or prevent His will from being done in our lives or in the world.**

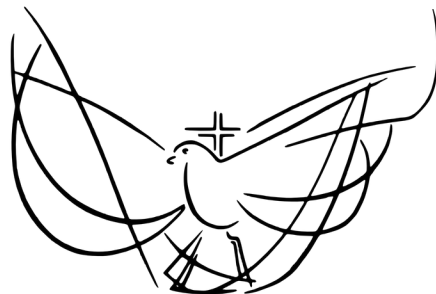
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