

Welcome to a Year in the New Testament

By Rev. J. David Israel

I'm so glad you've taken up the challenge to read through the New Testament in a year. This is a journey of faith that will take you places you never expected to go. In the end you will be glad you went. Reading through the Gospels will ground you in the knowledge of all that Christ said and did. The book of The Acts of the Apostles will help you learn what those first believers did as they sought to imitate their Savior. The many letters that follow will give you insight into the struggles and triumphs of the first faith communities. The instructions these letters give to the early churches will inspire your heart as you seek to be as faithful. The concluding book, The Revelation of John, remains the most mysterious book printed and engages the mind with the promises of the future God is creating. Welcome to this journey.

It is my pleasure to provide you with some reflections along the way. I've written these, chapter by chapter, in prayerful hope that they will offer you deeper understanding and insight. More than anything I hope they will spark in you a desire to learn more. This is designed to be read Monday through Friday, taking the weekend off (or to catch up.) I've offered three Psalms to be read each weekend for those who want something more. If you persevere through these as well you will have read the full book of Psalms before year end.

As a side note, I've been reading through the New International Version of the Bible as I've been writing this. I think any version is helpful in its own ways, but I determined to read from just one as I've written. This should allow you a reference point if you get tripped up by some of the words that are used.

I recommend that you purchase your own study Bible or use the online Bibles provided for free at www.bible.com or www.biblegateway.org. Both sites provide many different translation choices and also reference materials to help if you like. To receive these devotions daily by email, visit www.lwinfo.org.

A Guide to Daily Reflection
By Rev. Karen Nothdurft
What? So what? Now what?

“What? So What? And Now What?” is a simple guide to help you reflect upon the scripture each day. “What?” defines the information in the chapter. “So what?” helps us discover the meaning of a passage. “Now what?” challenges us to consider what we will do in order to apply God’s word in our lives.

Read the daily scripture asking “What?” What is happening in this chapter? What people are in the story? What information is found in this scripture passage? What troubles arise?

Then look back over the reading asking “So what?” So what does this mean? So what is the point of this passage? So what questions does this scripture raise?

Review the chapter once more asking “Now what?” Now what am I to do? Now that I have encountered this truth, what action will I take? Now, what will I change in my life in order to live according to the Spirit of Christ?

Keep a notebook of your findings, reflections and questions. You may wish to jot down a prayer, a song or a word that you want to lift up to God.

SEPTEMBER 9

Grace

Colossians 2

From time to time it's good to return to the simple concept of God's grace. Simple in its nature, complex in its form. Simply put, grace is the term we use to describe the love of God that is offered to us in Jesus Christ. It's unconditional love. It's a love that says to us, "I don't care who you are, what you've done or where you've been, I love you and that's all that matters." It is beautiful in its simplicity. However, God's grace goes deeper than that.

In the terms of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Movement, grace comes to us in various ways. Before we ever know it, God is pursuing us with His love. Technically that's called "prevenient grace." It is the grace that prevents us from ever getting so far from God that we can't turn back. Like a toddler that thinks she's running away from her mother only to turn around and find she was right behind her the whole way, God is on our trail all the time willing us to turn back.

Verse 12 illustrates another aspect of faith, that of justification. Verse 13 actually comes first. In our sinful life we are already dead. From God's view, we have cut off the relationship that the Lord has offered by turning away from him and running. When we turn around and face God we see the depth of the division we have created. However, faith in Christ comes with the image of baptism. In that "sign act" our dead self is lowered into a watery grave, but thanks be to God we don't stay there. God sees that we have given ourselves over to His love and are willing to die to ourselves so that we can live with Christ. Just as Christ was resurrected from the dead, we come back out of the water as a resurrected new life that has been made right (justified) with God.

Verses 6-11 then remind us that we are to continue in that faith. It's not the one-time event of our justification (also known as salvation) that completes our faith. It is when we continue in our faith that we are made more and more like Christ. Sanctifying grace is God's love that loves us just the way we are and loves us too much to let us stay like that. As we "continue to live our lives in Him" the spirit of God helps us to grow into the life Christ wants to give us.

Grace is not some static emotion. Grace is the active movement of God from before we know He loves us to loving throughout our lives and into our eternity. Give God thanks for His grace.

SEPTEMBER 10

Basement or Balcony

Colossians 3

Where do you sit? Someone once preached a sermon when I was sitting in the pews about basement people and balcony people. You can quickly discern the difference. If you're a basement person you're always dragging people down. You complain and gossip and stoop to the lowest set of values. If you're a balcony person you are always lifting people up, speaking highly and kindly of others and through your example you're taking them to a higher plain.

In the Book of John we read about the story of a person seeking to understand what Jesus is teaching. Christ tells him that he must be born again. At least that is one way of interpreting what Christ said. The Greek word that Christ spoke was "anothen," which means "again" but could also mean "above." Jesus says you must be born again and this new birth comes from above. (See what I wrote on John 3.) The root of that word is used in this verse and this time it's clear, set your hearts on things that come from above.

If your heart is set in the basement it is set on "sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed" and your attitude is that of "anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips." If your heart is set on things from above you will "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."

Come on up to the balcony. View the world from above. Set your heart on those things that are from above.

SEPTEMBER 11

Watch Out

Colossians 4

Just as I wrote about grace a few posts back, prayer is one of those exercises of faith that is both simple and quite complex. A simple definition I've heard before is "Prayer is speaking with and listening to God at any time, in any place, and about anything." You see, prayer is a two-way conversation with the One who loves you without reservation. Prayer is sharing the deepest parts of your heart and the shallowest of your thoughts. Prayer is asking God questions and listening for the answers. Prayer is hearing God ask a question and wrestling with your own answer... or talking it out together. Prayer is no different than that deep conversation you have with your husband or wife, best friend, or parent. It's really that simple.

However, once in a while scripture throws a dimension of prayer that reaches into a deeper place. It's a place that I'm not always comfortable with. Perhaps I drink too much caffeine and am far too accustomed to the speed of life that has come with the digital age. Perhaps the fact that I never seem to be without a TV, radio, or conversation partner makes this part of prayer most difficult. Paul instructs us to devote ourselves to prayer being watchful. Ummmm, what am I watching out for? Is something going to happen? Where should I look? What can I expect? Most especially, how long do I need to watch before I move on to something else?

Watchfulness is one of those deeper parts of prayer that takes practice and patience; two traits we're not very good at. Watchfulness is the sharing of our hearts with God in prayer and then sitting still (in our hearts) and watching for the way in which God works.

There was a board game I played as a child called "Mouse Trap." When you made the right move you got to add a component to a very complex mouse trap. When the full trap was built you turn the crank, the cog hits the lever, the lever moves the stop sign, the stop sign knocks the boot, the boot kicks the bucket, the bucket spills the marble, the marble travels down the stairs and through the gutter. At the end of the gutter the marble pushes up the pipe, and the hand moves the ramp which releases the second marble into the bathtub. It falls through the drain and down to the board that launches the man into the bucket which jostles the basket

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that falls down the stick to cover the mouse; trap complete.

What if watchfulness is like turning the crank and watching patiently as God goes through a seemingly impossible set of motions to bring prayer to fruition? It never seems it happens on my schedule or in the way I would accomplish it, but I've found over time that God is faithful if I'll take the time to watch.

SEPTEMBER 12

Idols

1 Thessalonians 1

In the book of Exodus the people of Israel are at Mt. Sinai. Moses has gone to the mountain top to speak with God on their behalf. They wait a long time and Moses doesn't come back down. After more than a month they decide Moses isn't coming back and God isn't going to be leading them any longer. They appeal to Moses' brother, Aaron, to lead them in worship of a new god. They hand over all their gold to be melted down and a calf is crafted to be the idol they will now worship.

Sound farfetched? You're thinking, "who in their right mind would think that a hunk of gold would be worthy of our worship?" It's fair to say that people were far less scientific in that day and it was easy to worship an inanimate object such as a statue of a young bull. As for today, that's the kind of bull that you're not going to fall for.

I was watching a baseball game one day when a rookie member of my home team hit his first major league home run. The ushers in the stadium asked the young girl who retrieved the ball to give it back to the player so he could keep it. In turn she would receive a ball signed by the hitter. Now follow this line of thinking. Let's say the young man becomes a star ball player. He hits homer after homer. In 20 years he retires having hit more homeruns than any other ball player in the history of the game. He's voted into the Hall of Fame and he becomes one of the most noteworthy players in the history of the game. One day, that young girl hands that signed ball over to an auction house or the ball player surrenders his first homer ball to a charity auction. That ball that cost the team \$1.88 on game day is now worth \$100,000 to the top bidder. Why? Because the player somehow transferred a part of himself to it? Does it have homerun magic? Will \$100,000 buy some form of blessing for the highest bidder? How is that inanimate object different from the golden calf? How is any idol of yesteryear different from the material object to which you place your faith?

As hard as it is to walk away from any object of your affection, that's how the people of Paul's day found it to walk away from idols of that day. Paul praises the people who looked at the dull lifeless material objects and decided instead to worship the living God of Jesus Christ.

What is the lifeless materialism you serve that draws your attention away from the living God made known to us in Jesus Christ?

SEPTEMBER 13

Scam

1 Thessalonians 2

I got an email from a friend. The email address was correct. The information within it seemed convincing. This friend was in France and they were stuck at the airport. His wallet had been stolen and his passport was missing. He had worked out the passport issue but didn't have money for the flight home. The airline was willing to help out if I could wire \$500 to the link I found in the email. Wow, did it sound like a problem for my friend. The real problem was that I had just seen my friend that morning, he'd never been to France and this email was a scam. How do you know if someone is trying to scam you?

There was a radio political pundit that contended if you want to know the scam, follow the money. Who's making how much off of what? In the political field it's safe to say that if a politician is getting wealthier while in office, there might be a problem. While the upper level of elected offices compensates handsomely, they aren't wealth producing. Money is coming from somewhere and the source expects to garner influence from it. In the religious field check the personal property. One televangelist had her grown children living in multimillion dollar houses on the property owned by her charity.

In verse 5 Paul says that he isn't putting forth some scam to cover up his own greed. As a matter of fact, Paul took no money from any of his ministries. Instead he worked a side job to support his ministry. He did however enjoy spending time at the homes of kind hosts and hostesses who supported his work while he was in town. Hospitality is far different from a wealth building scheme.

Paul and the eleven apostles (excluding Judas for obvious reasons) all died broke and most died at the end of a sword or hanging upon a cross. In all of that time they never wavered from their conviction to the message they were bringing. They did this out of a deep love for their savior Jesus Christ and for the people who did not yet know Him. If that's a scam, follow the money. Who's getting rich? Who's getting the advantage? When the offer of Christ is of no benefit to the one who offers, the devil is the only one getting scammed on the deal. Trust those who bring the message with nothing to gain.

SEPTEMBER 16

Fellowship

1 Thessalonians 3

“What a fellowship, what a joy divine. Leaning on the everlasting arms.” C’mon, everybody, sing along. Do you know that old hymn? The song is about leaning on Jesus. It’s about trusting Him in this life and in the life to come. In your life you have the blessing of being able to have fellowship with Christ because He lives. When Jesus ascended bodily into the heavens, His Spirit stayed behind to be with us. We can fellowship with the actual Spirit of Christ in our prayer time and worship. We can learn to recognize His presence in our daily lives and experience what it means to never be alone. What a fellowship.

Years ago a large church in California developed a set of Christian principles that they contended were the most important practices of a Christian. It was an important development for several reasons. For churches, we learned that while there are hundreds of ways to practice the faith, focusing our efforts on a few helped people. Rather than encouraging them to go with whatever seemed to feel good, it gave direction. Another reason it was important was because one of the tenants of faith they lifted up was that of fellowship. Their version of fellowship was what would lay the groundwork for a Christian to experience fellowship with Christ.

Fellowship at that church meant that you had a group of people who you regularly met with, outside of Sunday morning greeting, to learn with, pray for and encourage in the faith. Fellowship meant that you practiced sharing the presence of Christ with one another so that when you were apart from each other, you could know Christ’s presence in real and tangible ways. Then when you came back together you could encourage one another in the faith all the more.

In this chapter, Paul is encouraging the Thessalonians in their faith. And then, when Timothy returns from a visit to Thessalonica, he is encouraged by the reports of their faith. This encouragement is lived out vicariously through Timothy but for Paul, and I suspect for the Thessalonians, it was as real as if Paul had gone himself.

Christian fellowship is vital to your faith. It moves you closer to Christ as you move closer to one another. Are you in a Sunday school class, small group or other learning group? These are ways to encourage faith and help you learn to fellowship with Christ.

SEPTEMBER 17

Second Coming

1 Thessalonians 4

There are 31,102 verses in the Bible. About 100 of them deal with the second coming. That's 0.3% and yet there is a lot of focus on the issue. I think that since the issue is so mysterious and not much is said, we have a tendency to want to try to pick them apart and see if we can figure it all out. There are whole seminary courses taught on it, churches formed around it and predictions (all of which have turned out to be wrong) made about it. A book series was written on the topic that gained a lot of traction in the 90's. Many read that series as if it was the gospel truth. (I read it as the fiction that it is. I see it as a far cry from the future God will create that will culminate in the return of the Savior.)

I think this overwhelming focus on the topic is distracting from the mission of the church and I believe Paul thought so as well. I see this as the reason he devotes only a few sentences to the second coming of Christ. In verses 13-18 he gives a very short encouragement. At that time some were bothered that friends had died before Christ's return. Paul seeks to put their minds at ease by sharing that the dead in Christ will rise, even before the living get caught up in the celebration. He's going to devote a little more time to it in the next chapter as well, but it really isn't the point of his letter.

Today, we realize that 2000 years of Christians have died and one day they all will rise. Who knows, maybe we will be with them 2000 years from now when it happens. Maybe we will be with them 2 days from now when it happens. Be encouraged, it will happen. Until then there are people to win for Christ. There are hungry to feed and the thirsty to be brought a drink. Don't get distracted from the mission. Since Jesus didn't know the day it would happen, we won't ever guess it right. So let's plan on spending about 0.3% of our time on it and the other 99.7% on the things we are called upon by God to do.

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Second Coming Again

1 Thessalonians 5

Paul does put a little more time into the issue of the second coming of Christ. Paul's point is not about Christ's return but our preparedness. It's fair to say that Paul expected it in his own lifetime. It didn't happen that way. I would guess that right up to the point that Paul lost his head to a Roman sword he was expecting to hear Gideon's trumpet signal the return of Christ. It didn't happen. At least not for those who are alive or those yet to be born. More on that in a moment.

If I had to characterize Paul's teaching on the topic, I would say that he was first concerned that each of us present ourselves to non-believers in a way that will bring them to Christ. Secondly, he was very concerned that the way we presented ourselves be attractive because it met with the highest of moral standards. He was also concerned that the church as a whole was seen in a positive light so it could be a good witness for Christ. Somewhere down the line of teachings and really as a tangential thought is this idea that while you are living the Christian life you are preparing yourself for that moment in which Christ comes.

Now let me return to where I left off in the first paragraph. I believe that when we die we immediately meet Christ. Our last breath on earth is followed by our first breath in Christ's presence. For those who have died, that is their personal second coming of Christ. One day it will happen in human history. Until then we will live and die and when we die we meet Christ. Our preparedness to meet Christ becomes important at that point. Are you living a life that draws non-believers to Christ? Are you living high moral standards? Are you leading the church toward a positive witness for Christ? This is how you prepare to meet Christ in this life or the next.

SEPTEMBER 19

Vengeance

2 Thessalonians 1

The Bible is a dangerous book. There are strong and difficult passages in it. Psalm 137:8-9 reads, “O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” Take that out of the context of the whole of the Bible and some nut case is going to say, “God wants us to kill all the babies in Babylon.” Think it won’t happen? Jesus says, “...they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them...” (Mark 16:18) and some misguided preachers have died from drinking poison during worship. This is a dangerous book.

For this reason, I’m always concerned when we read passages like we find in verses 7 and 8, “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.” There are a few things up front that we must be clear about. First, we’ve established over the last couple of day’s readings that this is God’s business and not ours. We’re not in charge of inflicting vengeance. Second, none of us is able to predict that it will happen in our lifetime or, more importantly, in the lifetime of the people we want vengeance upon. It’s vitally important that we read these verses in the context they were written and the context of the whole Bible.

The Thessalonians were suffering persecution. The letter is not clear of the source or manner of the persecution, but it is clear it was happening. The source may have been the Jewish community that was resisting the followers of Christ. It may have been family and friends that thought the new believers had lost their minds. It’s very likely it was the civil government and military forces who were given latitude to torture and put to death the Christians who were being portrayed by others as insurgent. During times of persecution it is normal to look to God for final judgment on the persecutors. Paul is making clear that God sees what happens and is keeping score. One day that score will be settled.

The other issue is that we need to read this passage in light of Jesus’

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command to love our enemies. Jesus tells us to love those who persecute us and bring us harm. The purpose of this love is to bring about the possibility that they will become shamed by their actions and turn to Christ. Not that we bring the shame. We only bring love and it is on them and Christ to see the shame and seek another way.

The life purpose of a follower of Jesus Christ is to live in such a way that others will come to know Christ; friend or enemy. If our focus is placed upon God's vengeance, our enemy will not likely meet the Son of God. Vengeance belongs to God, the Bible tells us. Leave it in God's hands. Love those who have brought you harm and seek their transformation from persecutor to brother or sister in Christ.

SEPTEMBER 20

Chosen

2 Thessalonians 2

There's nothing better than being picked to be a part of the team. Whether you're talking about a pick-up game of backyard baseball or a task force at work to solve a new problem, it's nice to be chosen. It means they trust you and believe you will make a contribution. It means your skills, abilities, and perhaps your personality are appreciated. There are few lines of invitation that sound better to a person than the words, "I choose you to be on my team."

Being chosen by God is a part of understanding your faith. God chose you. Out of 4 billion people on the planet God chose you. You're special. God knows you very personally. God says that as you were growing in your mother's womb, and before that, God decided you are one He wants on His team. God knows the hairs on your head but also the warts and blemishes and none of that has stopped the Lord of all creation from looking at you and deciding "You have what I want for My team." He knows your limits and shortcomings. These aren't weaknesses with God, as a matter of fact, in your weak areas God is at His best. Imagine being a part of a team is like that. Alone we aren't close to what we are together.

God chose others to be on His team as well. That's because you have shortcomings and weaknesses. Let's face it, if the first person chosen had all the character traits necessary to get the work of God done, the rest of us wouldn't be on the team. Now here's the tough part for us to realize when we think we were more special than anyone else. God has chosen everyone. Every person who has ever lived, lives now, will live in the future, God has chosen. That doesn't make you any less special to God. It does, however, place a lot of responsibility on you. Paul Tillich says that the responsibility on us is to "Simply accept the fact that you are accepted." In the language of this post, Choose to be Chosen.

In verse 13 of this passage Paul reminds us to spend time giving God thanks for being Chosen to be a part of His mission in the world. Accept that you are accepted and choose to be Chosen.

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 112-114

SEPTEMBER 23

Culture Clash

2 Thessalonians 3

There was a news report recently about a very large company that has signs around encouraging hard work. By all reports, the work is very hard. The expectation for performance and output is very high. With 180,000 employees it's hard to communicate those expectations properly. The reporter shared that the pace of work was so high that there were employees who were literally crying at work. Grown adults were finding it difficult to meet expectations and were breaking down in tears. As the reporter dug deeper he suggested that this may be representative of a shift in the culture that this company is experiencing.

Today our culture is more focused on "quality of life" than ever before. To the extent that work enhances quality of life, work is a good thing. The point at which one's job gets in the way of quality is where those things fall apart. This particular company is known for its efficiencies and speed of delivery. Apparently, the hard work that goes into making those things possible is meeting with a workforce that doesn't appreciate the demands of that work. At this point the response of the company has been, "you don't have to work that hard, unless you want to keep working here." Will the culture one day override that corporate attitude? Time will tell.

I think Paul had the same sort of thing in mind when writing verses 6-15. He simply said, "You don't have to work, but don't expect to eat." The culture among some in early Christianity was that they had been taught that Christ was coming back at any moment. If that's about to happen, why bother working. I've got enough in the pantry to make it through the next couple of weeks. That ought to cover until he shows back up. That culture of sloughing off was in conflict with the ability to share the gospel.

This was one of Paul's earliest letters but by now he had figured out that 20 years had passed since the ascension of Christ and he hadn't yet returned. It might not be a good idea to try to fix an ETA in your mind and stick with it. "So get to work" Paul was telling them, "And if you're an able bodied person and you refuse to work, that's OK. Just don't step up to the dinner table, it won't be there for you."

By now we've all figured out that we can't put all of our trust in Christ coming back any time soon. Instead perhaps we take verse 13 to heart and "never tire of doing what is good." To date, there is no conflict in our culture with working hard to do good.

SEPTEMBER 24

Pastoral Letters

1 Timothy 1

This reading marks a shift again in the genre of writing style. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Acts told the story of Jesus and the early formation of the church. Romans through 2 Thessalonians were letters Paul wrote to whole communities of believers. Now we move into letters known as the “pastoral epistles.” These letters were written as a personal message to an individual. They give us great insight into how we are supposed to relate to people who are also on a faith journey.

The way Paul starts this letter is revealing when it comes to faith. Paul refers to Timothy as his son in the faith. Do you have a son in the faith? Or a daughter in the faith? What would that look like and how would that work. If you’re a parent, consider your own children. In their infancy they were totally dependent upon you for everything. By the age of 3 they were proficient at telling you no and wanted to explore the whole world by wandering away from you. In their teens they wander off and experiment with things you’ve tried to keep them away from. In their twenties they are almost too busy for you, but they begin to seek your advice once again. After that they figure out that maybe it’s not about the rights and wrongs in life, it’s about relationships that matter and Mom and Dad become more than parents or friends.

What if you took people into your life who were infants in the faith? You would bring them along and be faithful to them, even when they take baby steps in the wrong direction. Throughout the maturation of faith they might wander off into experimental faith and get off track. However, you hang with them until they start to get caught up in their own ministries and mission projects but eventually they come back to that relationship they had with you from the very start. It’s one based upon trust and caring. It’s one that has Christ at the center.

That’s what Paul means when he calls Timothy his son. I think we’re all supposed to have someone who is immature in faith who we are bringing along as well as someone who is bringing us along. Who are those people for you?

SEPTEMBER 25

Playing Politically Safe

1 Timothy 2

I have this love/hate relationship with the political process. I truly hate the nastiness and rancor with which our candidates think they need to interact in order to gain our attention. I think it belittles us as the voters and it demeans the process. I hate the money that is spent. Believe me, I can come up with a billion better ways to spend the \$5 billion dollars it is estimated to have been spent on the 2016 presidential election. In the end it is embarrassing and our nation becomes a good joke for the late night talk shows and a laughing stock on the world stage.

However, I love watching and learning from the ways people interact. If you want to know what Americans are thinking right now, listen to the candidates. They spend millions to research and test market their ideas. By election night, the candidates are giving us a fairly clear snapshot into the American mind with their platforms. I've watched as several of the dark horse candidates get called out on the flaws in their thinking. It's perversely fun to watch them try to wiggle out of a tough spot when they are trying to play it politically safe.

I approach this chapter wanting to play it politically safe. Paul was writing 2000 years ago. To apply all of the gender bias to today's culture would be simply unfair; not to mention dangerous for me to keep 50% of my readers. However, if you pick through it carefully, there are a couple of things to glean from this chapter. Verse 8 can apply to both men and women. Lifting holy hands referred to offering yourself in complete surrender to the Lord. Doing so without being disagreeable toward one another would simply make your surrender more complete.

Now that part about the way women should dress... it could apply to men as well. Paul plays with the words a little and I like where he goes. In verse 9 he suggests women should adorn themselves with good deeds. Shouldn't we all dress ourselves in the good things we do?

Yes, I danced around the topic like a politician. Sometimes the best way to redeem a portion of scripture is to stay silent on the controversial part and to lift up what is important.

SEPTEMBER 26

Resume

1 Timothy 3

Occasionally I need to hire people for employment within the church. I receive resumes and put out job descriptions. It's all very clinical it seems. On the resumes there are lists of previous employers, tasks accomplished, school completed, references, etc. Job descriptions have a checklist of duties and responsibilities, with a disclaimer that there may be other duties as assigned. That's a code word that says, "I really don't know what you're going to be doing so be prepared for it to look nothing like this description."

Wouldn't it be refreshing if a resume came in saying in effect what Paul outlines as a qualification to lead a church? It might say, "When it comes to my word, I am above reproach. I am faithful to my spouse and even tempered. I am able to display self-control in tough situations and I have been called "respectable." I am always open to caring for newcomers and love to teach. I'll never exhibit drunken behavior or violence and I shun the temptation to be quarrelsome. Money is not a driving factor in my life. My family is wonderful and I love them dearly. I dote on them as a good parent should but never refrain from proper discipline when it is warranted. I have been a follower of Jesus Christ for many years and have been active in my church on many levels, including leadership responsibilities. I shun the devil and am not given to flattery. My reputation outside of the church is solid as well. My past will never be an embarrassment to the church."

I'd have a tough time not taking that kind of person seriously. Consider your own qualifications. Could you pass this job description listed for overseers and deacons? If not, why not? What in your life needs to change to put you in line for one of those jobs?

SEPTEMBER 27

Heroes

1 Timothy 4

A few years ago, three friends sprang into action where it was needed. A well-armed terrorist boarded a train in France. The friends were on vacation, but heroism doesn't take a vacation. One of the young men, a US Airman, tapped another on the shoulder, an Army National guardsman, and said, "Get him." The two men jumped the would-be terrorist and wrestled him to the ground. The third friend, a businessman, followed close behind to assist. When asked why he jumped in, he responded with something to the effect of "When your friends are in danger you act." These three men, despite injuries from the altercation, held the gunman until authorities could arrive. At a special ceremony in France the French president presented them with his country's highest honor.

We love heroes and we love to honor and recognize them. We should. They've earned it. Ever since 9/11 our country has taken time to appreciate our everyday heroes as well. Our police, firefighters, and military have once again earned a center spot in our appreciation. It seems that there were always pockets of applause for these heroes, but the national attention and wide public support they deserve seems to have been downplayed from the Vietnam era until September 11, 2001. However, today we love our heroes who rush in where others fear to tread. (As a side note, our police have received a black eye as of late. From what I've read there is good reason to be upset with a few police officers and the laws they enforce. There has been some blatant racism involved. However, these officers are the minority and the profession as a whole does not deserve our scorn.)

Most of us have asked ourselves the question, "given the same set of circumstances, would I have jumped in?" The answer to that question can't be known from one individual to another until the moment arises. If we're honest with ourselves, very few of us are going to face a time where a life is in peril. However, we come face to face daily with people who are in peril for their eternal life. Not to be overdramatic or to diminish our heroes, but ask yourself the question, "Is the eternal life of my neighbor less important than their physical life?" Look at verse 16: "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers." How you live your life and act on your

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faith could save not only yourself, but those around you. Pray that you will have the courage that, when the moment presents itself, you will be prepared to jump in with an eternal message of salvation. Be a hero of the faith.

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 115-117

SEPTEMBER 30

Literal Danger

1 Timothy 5

My mom is a widow. My dad passed away a nearly a decade ago. As I look at this chapter I ask myself, how do I apply it to the situation for today? It should be so easy. Interpret the chapter, come up with a list of rules and live accordingly. I think I'm able to squirm out of responsibility for mom because she has more money in the bank than I. She also gets a monthly pension and social security from the days my dad worked. So I can pretty much wash my hands of her... I don't think scripture teaches that.

Many of us can be accused of the danger of taking the Bible literally rather than seeking to interpret it for today. In that day there were no bank accounts, social security or pensions. The fifth commandment of the ten, to "honor thy father and mother", was meant to be the retirement plan for when one became too old to work. So when Paul offers some instruction on how to treat the elderly, he's working as an extension of that fifth commandment. I don't believe he was giving a strict account meant to be taken literally down through history. After all, he was speaking to people who lived in houses and the Ten Commandments were written 1500 years before to people who were Bedouins living in tents as they wandered the wilderness of Sinai. Should he command, honor the widows by putting them up in tents? No, that was 1500 years ago. Paul intended to honor widows in a first century manner. I think he would intend for us to honor widows and widowers in a 21st century manner.

I think there are some verses that can be taken literally and applied to our life today. The Ten Commandments still ring true down through history. However, be careful not to assume everything must be done in the same manner as the first century church. We study scripture to allow the Spirit to speak to us today. We don't study scripture to give us a point by point manner of living. That would put us in literal danger.

OCTOBER 1

Who's in the Fight?

1 Timothy 6

I tend not to dwell on the spiritual realm. By that I mean that I don't place much focus on angels and demons. I rarely ever mention the devil in my messages or writing. It's something of a pendulum swing thing for me. I remember years ago (a long time ago) when the comedian Flip Wilson coined the phrase "The devil made me do it." The thing about comedians is that they point out the flaws we have and then exaggerate them to such wide proportions that we have to laugh. In some people's way of thinking the devil has control over their thoughts and actions and they can't control themselves. It goes hand in hand with the theology that states that God's grace is irresistible. Meaning, if God decides that you should be saved, you can't resist it. The flip side of that coin says that all of those who are destined for an eternity with the devil are destined because God didn't offer His grace to them. I don't buy into that.

In verse 12 Paul instructs Timothy to "Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses." I believe that Paul is referring to an outward fight as well as an inward fight. The outward fight has to do with the people who oppose Timothy's ministry. I want to focus on the inward fight because I do believe that the inward fight is a spiritual battle between the Spirit of Christ within you and the spirit of evil that dwells in this world, which we personify in Satan. The battle is real and many of us are torn apart by it. Look at verses 4 and 5 and tell me if any of these are going on in your mind and heart. How many of us wring our hands over money and allow it to occupy our thoughts? Look at what verse 10 warns.

Here's the reason I rarely speak to the issue of the devil versus the Spirit of Christ. In the spiritual realm where this battle is being waged it's as if an army of first graders armed with toy guns has decided to take on a crack unit of the Navy Seals. Satan has already lost the war to the overwhelming force of the love of God. However, the battle wages within your heart. If your focus allows you to say, "The devil made me do it," then the devil will win, over and over again, as long as you give him the control of your life. However, if your focus is on the love of God made known in Jesus Christ and if you surrender your will to the power, control

OCTOBER 1

and direction of the Holy Spirit, you've won! Now it's just a matter of working with the Lord to build up your defenses against those temptations that lead to evil thoughts and ultimately evil actions.

Pray "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" today and every day. End your focus on the spiritual forces of evil and allow yourself to be overcome by the force of Christ reigning in your heart. Set your mind on these things alone and the battle is won.

OCTOBER 2

Ancestral Faith

2 Timothy 1

I once heard a story that my fore-bearers left England for the “New World” in the late 1600’s to escape religious persecution. I really have no way to prove that. It will remain as legend for me. I’ve read the obituaries of my great, great, great grandfather, Elijah Washburn Israel, as well as his son, Frederick Wallace Israel. Both of these men and their wives were people of deep faith according to the newspaper articles. However, as best as I can tell, Fred’s son, Clyde Lewis Israel, wasn’t much for church, nor was his son, my grandfather, Jerome Wallace Israel, or my own father, John Stuart Israel. My mother, though, made sure that I grew up going to both worship and Sunday school. I don’t know why faith skipped a few generations that way, but it most certainly did.

Nancy and I have been very intentional about raising our children in the faith. Even before we were called into ministry, our children were in Sunday school and worship. Today they are all married and they each are involved in their own churches where they live. We enjoy being grandparents early and seeing that our grandchildren are not skipping a generation of faith either.

Paul speaks of Timothy’s ancestral faith in verse 5, “I am reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also.” Even though he lifts up this faith he doesn’t hesitate to still offer additional teaching on the matter of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. Faith is an active, living pursuit. It’s intended that we not only pay homage to the ancestral faith handed down to us, but that we also seek regular opportunities to grow our faith through worship and learning experiences. It is also intended that, whether or not we have a family history of faith, we create one by becoming the ancestral faith of our children and grandchildren.

Spend a moment in prayer for the faith of your children and grandchildren (even if they have not yet been born.) Then seek ways to increase their faith. Not a parent/grandparent? Who else can you encourage and build up in their faith?

OCTOBER 3

Useful

2 Timothy 2

It's always been a personal pursuit of mine to be useful. Everyone has different things that motivate them. For me, it's being useful. I'm sure some psychologist could pick apart my childhood and figure out why I'm that way. That doesn't change the fact that I want to be considered useful. I know that many in my profession enter into ministry to be loved. While most would settle for simply being liked, loved is the goal. There are others that crave the recognition and respect that can come with being a pastor. Often times we find ourselves settling for less than our goal if we can just get something.

What motivates you? It takes some serious self-reflection to come to a conclusion on this question. Not that I spend a lot of time thinking about myself, but I do often ask myself why I am so motivated to live out the Christian faith. If I can come to an understanding of why, I might be able to help others live their faith. I've concluded that I'm drawn to the Christian faith because I want to be useful. To be useful means that your actions have a purpose that has value. Personally, I can't think of anything that has greater value than the love of God found in Jesus Christ. So my life pursuit has become to be useful in sharing that love.

In this passage Paul talks about household items that are common and others that have special use. When I read that passage I think that I don't want my life to be common. I want to be used for the special purpose of introducing people to their eternity in Christ.

What motivates you toward faith? For some it may be that you crave that love that is in Christ. For others it may be out of a sense of loneliness that needs a friend. Still others desire that anchor in the storms of life. I also suspect that it may change from time to time or mature as you grow in faith. I believe that you can find your purpose in life if you'll discern your motivation and seek to offer that to others in the Name of Christ.

OCTOBER 4

The End is Near

2 Timothy 3

There goes Paul again, being an alarmist. “Oh no, the end is near, the end is near!” He begins with “There will be terrible times in the last days.” “Last days of what?” I ask. If you were able to measure the end of the world by the bad behavior of people, every day would be the last. People love themselves... have you seen the film industry? People love money... take a hike on Wall Street. People who are boastful and proud are all around professional sports... as well as the semi-pro college sports and amateur sports arenas. You want to see abusive? Turn on C-SPAN and watch congress. Do I need to go on? It’s not new. It’s been around for hundreds of years; even thousands. It will likely survive you and me.

Perhaps that’s the point. The end is near. Maybe not the universal end of all things. The end is always near for you and me. If you’re a creationist you believe that humanity is roughly 6000 years old. If you’re an “old earth” type of person you believe Homo sapiens have been around about 200,000 years. Either way, if you live to be 75, you will have existed somewhere between .04% and 1.25% of the history of humanity. Barely a blink of the eye. From the creationist perspective, it took 4000 years for God to send Christ. It’s only been 2000 years since. Do we have another 2000 to wait until Christ returns? If so, is the end really near? However, since life is so fragile, it is safe to say that the end is always near for the individual.

For me, the most disturbing of lines in this chapter comes in verse 5 “... having a form of godliness, but denying its power.” I’m fairly sure you can’t deceive God. If the end is near for you, does your worship on Sunday reflect your activities during the week? Do you wrap yourself up in faith, all the while portraying to the world what is listed in verses 2-4? If so, and if the end is near, what does that suggest for your eternity? Isn’t it time for you to repent of some of your ways and seek the godliness the Lord wants to put into your life? The end is near. Don’t delay.

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 118-120

OCTOBER 7

Scratching the Itch

2 Timothy 4

The political season is in full swing this time of year. Candidates are looking for photo ops, kissing babies and shaking hands. Debates are taking place, each candidate seeking to take as much of the camera time as possible to get his/her platform across to the listener. Each one assuming their message is the majority message. As with most years, there's the undercurrent of dissatisfaction with the status quo. Most candidates are pushing the idea that they're the ultimate outsider. They know the solution and have the cure to what ails our government and political system.

People rush to support the candidates who are saying what they want to hear. It seems, as always is the case, that people are willing to ignore a lot of personal shortcomings of their candidate as long as they say the right things. They ignore personal attacks on the other candidates even if they think they are poorly considered, because the words are courting their political heart. They ignore background, faith expression, lack of experience, or even failed experience as long as the candidate will scratch their ears with the words they want to hear.

This was happening with the preachers back in Timothy's day and Paul is warning him about them. They'll say what their followers want to hear, they'll attack you personally and good Christians will ignore it. They'll share a theology that gathers a crowd and ignore what the Lord has said in the past. But how is that any different from today? People gravitate toward the latest belief system because it makes them feel good. It tickles their ears in the most desirable ways.

Consider this: the most important preacher who ever preached was crucified for what He said and did. He only had a handful of followers when He died. Yet His message stands 2000 years later and millions worldwide are His adherents. Take the time someday and examine your life in light of the words of Jesus. If you don't find something Christ says that suggests that your life is offensive, read it again. Jesus doesn't say what you want to hear. He speaks truth and you get to choose which truth you prefer to follow.

OCTOBER 8

Minimum Standard

Titus 1

Do you hold yourself to a standard? I remember growing up in the Boy Scout program. The Scout Oath and Scout Laws were drilled into us as the standard of behavior. In the Oath we promised to keep ourselves physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight. That's a pretty good list. The laws were personal standards that we were to project toward others; trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent. I don't think that anyone could argue against these standards of behavior and they are standards I've tried to live by ever since. It's not that I repeat them daily to myself. Rather, I became so well indoctrinated with these standards that they became innate in who I am. Am I 100% on point with these? Probably not all the time, but I can say for sure that whenever I violate any one of these, I don't have to be told. I remind myself that I fall short.

In this chapter, Paul instructs Titus to hold the leaders of the church to a standard. The men in leadership (and it was primarily men in that day) had to fit a certain model for behavior before being chosen to lead. I occasionally hear of pastors complaining that they are being held to a higher standard than the rest of the population and I scratch my head wondering why they are surprised. I might even entertain the question of what lower standard they would accept but I quickly eject that thought. It is as it should be. Why would we accept less?

What standard do you hold yourself to? Whether a leader in the church structure you always have an opportunity to lead others to faith by your example. A mentor of mine recently sent me a text that rhymed, "No matter where you go, no matter what you do, set a good example, for someone's watching you!" What is that standard of an example you are seeking to set? What is the minimum for you? Perhaps it would be better to ask what the optimum standard is. In that way you are always striving to excel and not simply seeking to squeak by.

OCTOBER 9

Attractive

Titus 2

It's fair to say that we are a culture for whom the outward appearance of a person is important. It is said today that someone with the face of Abraham Lincoln would have trouble being elected president because his appearance would affect the people's vote. That's a rather sad statement, but have you ever seen an advertisement where the product pitchman/woman was unattractive (at least by the standards of today)? We value beauty, handsomeness, fitness and other physical qualities in others. People with those "attractive" features are far more likely to be promoted ahead of those who are lesser so. Unfair, to be sure. Yet it is a well-documented reality.

In my post from yesterday I talked about a standard of behavior and that theme is carried over into this chapter. In verse 10 the link between behavior and the word "attractive" is made. In this case relating not to being physically attractive but to being spiritually attractive. Paul encourages people to behave in such a way that will cause people to be attracted to our Savior. Verse 11 gives the reason for being attractive in that way. It's because God has offered salvation to all. If your behavior is unattractive, who would find themselves looking toward the beauty of the salvation we are offered in Jesus Christ?

My father remained opposed to the faith to his death. He would often say, "Why would I want to go to church on Sunday with people who are going to cheat me on Monday?" In his business career Dad had several dealings with people who claimed to be Christians but were morally and ethically corrupt. They made Christ unattractive to my father in their behavior. From time to time I pray that God's love is far bigger than my theology, that people like my father, for whom Christ has been presented in such an ugly manner, get a second chance when they come before the throne of God's grace. And then I pray, "forgive me when I have failed to present the full beauty of the salvation You have afforded us all." Join me in both seeking to present Christ in an attractive way and praying for our shortcomings in doing so.

OCTOBER 10

Hidden Treasure

Titus 3

I was walking down the hall at church one Sunday. I had a couple of church members with me and we were in a conversation about church business. As I continued talking and listening, one of the two with me stopped abruptly, bent over, and picked up a \$20 bill I had just mindlessly stepped over. It's not like I didn't need it and decided to let him have it. It's not like our hallways are lined with cash and I have gotten so used to it that I ignore it now. I was so busy thinking through the business of the church I missed the bill.

Sometimes we read scripture and miss what was said. We are moving through it fast enough that we miss a sparkling gem of advice. Like stepping over a \$20 bill, oblivious to its presence. For this reason, I want to point you to verse 14. It is the second to the last verse of this chapter and this book so we might have passed it by looking forward to the next book. In this one verse Paul is talking about money and our care of it. For Paul, "doing what is good" means to be devoted to hard work and income. It means to be setting aside as much as we can for those rainy day occurrences that happen from time to time. Paul knows that "urgent needs" arise all the time and we must be attentive to being prepared. It is assumed, because of all that we know about Paul, that he is writing from the perspective of faith. This set aside money is meant to make it possible for the urgent needs of others to be met as we graciously offer it out of our bounty. I would have stepped right over that verse if I hadn't taken my time. Did you?

John Wesley once wrote about money stating that the follower of Christ should "earn all you can, give all you can, save all you can." At the same time he wrote that should he be found dead with more than a couple of dollars to his person he should be considered a liar and a thief. The combination meant for him that all that we earn and save should be done so with an eye toward easing the suffering of others around us. It's a lesson that is a treasure that we might easily miss if we are too quick to move along.

OCTOBER 11

Bold in Writing

Philemon

It is a very bold letter. Written with grace. Yet there is a strong hint of instruction in it. Perhaps “hint” is even too subtle because Paul is not very subtle in what he is asking. Philemon is a man of wealth and a follower of Jesus Christ. He hosts a church in his own home and has become known to Paul (we’re not sure that they’ve ever actually met or only know one another by reputation.) As a man of wealth it would not be unusual for Philemon to own slaves. One such slave was Onesimus who escaped slavery in Philemon’s household. For some reason Paul and Onesimus became acquainted as Paul was in prison. Perhaps Onesimus was a fellow prisoner. Or, he may also have been someone who had come to Christ under Paul’s teaching before Paul’s imprisonment. Either way, it appears that Onesimus continued his servant ways by attending to Paul’s needs while Paul was in prison.

Now Paul has done what would be right in the eyes of the laws of the day. Paul has sent Onesimus back to Philemon. Philemon has many options. Among them, putting Onesimus to death for running away. Paul has asked... instructed... used the full blunt force of his pen... that Philemon offer a full pardon and send Onesimus back with his blessing.

As you read the many dynamics of this letter, consider yourself in the position of each of the three men; Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon. Imagine being Paul and offering such a bold request. Imagine being Onesimus and being asked by Paul to trust the Lord’s providence; that Philemon will do what is right in the eyes of the Lord. Imagine being Philemon and being asked to consider this one you once owned as a full brother in Christ. There’s a lot to consider in this letter. It stretches our faith on all fronts. Which part stretches you the most?

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 121-123

OCTOBER 14

And Now For Something Completely Different Hebrews 1

The book of Hebrews represents something of a shift in what you've been reading. Though there is some speculation, the author of this great theological statement of faith remains unknown. What is clear is that the author fully understood the Hebrew people. Without a doubt he was a member of the Jewish community and was a practicing Jew when he came to faith in Jesus Christ. Also, he was probably very well educated in Hebrew beliefs and theology. His command of the Hebrew, or Old, Testament is evident as he makes scripture references throughout the book. It makes one curious to ask who he was, and if he was a "he." Popular suggestions have been that the author was Paul, but most reject that today. Others suggest Barnabas, Luke, or Clement of Rome. Another popular suggestion today is that it was Priscilla. None of these can be proved and none of them support what I said about it being a book written by a Jew.

As you read through this book watch for how the author puts forth Jesus as the messiah that is promised in the Old Testament. Our Trinitarian understanding of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is supported within. Also the way we understand substitutionary atonement (that Christ died on the cross as a substitute for our sins) is explained within. I hope you enjoy this book as it is different from what you've been reading in the 13 previous letters.

We begin our reading with a very high understanding of the Son of God. What I mean by "high" is that the author shares with us a strong belief in the deity of the Son. The author doesn't even mention the first name, Jesus, or any of his titles; "Christ," "Messiah," or "Savior." What is most important to understand is that the author is sharing with us what was revealed to him... that the subject of this book is the Son of God. This Son stands above the angels in direct relationship with God Himself. This isn't "my friend Jesus" or the purveyor of moralistic teachings. This is the Son of God and Who is above all else.

Prepare yourself for a different type of reading, a higher presentation of the Messiah and an appeal to your understanding of the connection between the Son of God and the Old Testament Scriptures.

OCTOBER 15

He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother

Hebrews 2

It's not uncommon in many Christian circles to hear someone call you "brother" or "sister." "Brother David" I've been called countless numbers of time. Christians around the world are brothers and sisters. It's a big family and a great one to be a part of. However, it's not limited to the current Christians. It goes all the way back to Christ and includes all who have accepted salvation since Christ, the big brother of us all.

I have two brothers and two sisters in my family. I've never been ashamed to tell anyone about them. I'm fortunate in that. I'm actually proud of all four of them. They are all accomplished in one way or another. There have been, from time to time, brothers and sisters of the family of Christ of whom I'm not quite as proud. Certainly the brothers who led the crusades, killing thousands who would not profess Christ at the threat of their blade, are nothing to be proud of. Christians today who cause physical and spiritually harm to non-believers are also an embarrassment to me.

Yet all of these are of the same family. And Jesus is not ashamed to call us His brothers and sisters. I think that goes to the depth of forgiveness that goes into our salvation. Jesus tasted death for our sake, even before any of us had repented of our sins. That's a pretty strong love for us. While I don't think He overlooks our shortcomings today, I think Christ is far quicker to forgive than I.

Consider others in your church, the church down the street, the church in foreign lands. Those churches are filled with your brothers and sisters. Be proud to be a part of the family - Christ is.

OCTOBER 16

Stay on Target

Hebrews 3

There's a scene in the first Stars Wars movie where one of the fighter pilots is swooping down on the Death Star to drop a bomb. If he is able to hit just the right spot, the whole thing will explode. However, if he's off, it won't work at all. The whole way in to the target is filled with cannons shooting at him and enemy ships doing the same. He has to fly through a narrow valley with ridges that seem to jump out of nowhere. The task seems impossible. As he complains to his flight leader that he is unable to hold the flight path due to all the flak of enemy fire, his leader comes over the radio, "Stay on target." It's a disembodied voice, mechanical in sound, but he knows it as his leader's. "Stay on target." His leader is telling him in that message that he and the other flight members, will take care of the enemy as best they can. The pilot's only concern should be to keep to the course that will lead to the target.

That's the message I get out of today's reading. Sin is firing at us from all sides. Unfriendly terrain seems to erupt from a molehill to a mountain during the most harmless of conversations. Temptations are all around. Some of the temptations are so strong that it makes it seem that leaving the path we're on would be far easier than staying on the target of our faith.

This scripture tells us that our target is to enter God's rest. Falling to temptation and focusing on sin rather than righteousness all draw us away from that target. Friends, loved ones and faith leaders are calling out to you to "stay on target." The encouragement is there, they have your back, but can you allow their voice in your head to guide your thoughts and deeds or will you fall to temptation?

In the end, that pilot takes his eye off the target, pulls up out of the valley and his mission, and is destroyed by the enemy. That's how it works. So hear the voices of those faithful all around you and strive to "stay on target" today.

OCTOBER 17

Weekend

Hebrews 4

What are you doing this weekend? Do you have big plans? Places to which to travel? Soccer and softball games? It would seem that the busy nature of our week has been surpassed by the activities of our weekend. As a pastor I struggle with that issue. It's not the reason you think. Sure I'd like to see every one of you in church on Sunday. I think you're supposed to be there. The Bible tells us about Jesus in Luke 4:16, "on the Sabbath day He went into the synagogue, as was His custom." Christ didn't miss worship on the day of Sabbath. As those who would claim the name "Christian" we would do well to consider that trait of being a follower.

I don't think that's all it's about, though. Science teaches us that God created sleep because it repairs our body. It aids our minds by processing information we've gathered throughout the day. A lack of sleep makes us dull witted and destroys our bodies. Psychology also tells us that a person who works long hours and doesn't engage in mental downtime ends up troubled by the stress of life. Theology tells us that those who spend all of their lives focused upon the things of this world, their gain of possessions and adding up life experiences without attention to the One who created them, end up spiritually injured.

Worship is not all about giving God what is His. Worship is about allowing God to give you what He offers: rest. Rest that is physical, mental and spiritual is the offer. You need the rest God has to offer. Your body craves it. Your mind desires it. Your spirit longs for it. What are you doing this weekend? Consider the rest God has to offer.

OCTOBER 18

Go Between

Hebrews 5

In religious language, the priest is the one assigned the task to go between the people and their God. The priest is the one who offers prayers and sacrifices on behalf of the people. The people don't expect that they can encounter God. Instead the expectation is that the priest will encounter God and share their concerns, needs and wants. It was that way from the time of Moses to the time of Jesus as well. Moses, first, was the go-between. He would ascend the mountain, speak with God and bring down the commandments. Aaron became the High Priest, the one in charge of a family of priests who would for two thousand years appeal to God on behalf of the people. It was a good system, except people were a part of it. When people are given that kind of power, failure and abuse are not far from them. Over time the priests abused the system and cheated the people.

Our God is not one to be cheated out of the relationship between the people and God-Self. What do you do when the High Priest fails the people? Send a new priest. When it happens time and again, it becomes time to intervene in the system and change things. God sends a new priest to intervene on our behalf; to be the go-between that we can trust. In this case, God not only sends the Priest, but God IS the Priest. God sends Jesus Christ, His Son, to become the one between us and Him. However, since Christ IS God, we no longer have to live our lives separate from God, we can be in full communion with God as we seek Christ.

In times when I need to know that I am heard, I remember that Christ Himself hears my prayers and delivers them to Himself as He is one with God. Christ makes sacrifices and prayers for me, just as the High Priest did back in the days that Jesus walked the earth. I'm heartened to know that I don't have to travel to a particular place and speak with a particular person in order to have my prayers heard. I am heartened that I can speak to God Almighty directly, just as I am speaking to Jesus. We have a High Priest that doesn't stand between. We have a High Priest that lives within God and we can trust that God hears our every prayer.

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 124-126

OCTOBER 21

Oh Grow Up

Hebrews 6

When was the last time you were told to “grow up?” From time to time each of us is guilty of being a bit immature. Assuming maturity is based upon such things as selfishness, lack of self-control, jokes of darker humor and pranks that are humorous only to the one not being pranked, then each of us probably has a time in our life, if not recently, when we really needed to grow up. It is in our nature to wish to be young again. Who hasn't looked upon youth and shared the thought, “Oh to be young again.” That thought is most often followed by another. “Oh to be young again, but to know what I know now.” A friend of mine used to put it another way, “It's a shame to waste youth on the young.”

In the Christian faith, maturity is also the expectation. Not just growing old in the faith, but growing deeper in our knowledge of God and trust in His grace. This passage reminds us that growing up in the faith is our calling. “Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity...” Are you ready to grow up? The invitation is there. But the reward is far better than becoming young again.

Growing in your faith maturity brings you closer to Christ. It brings you closer to being able to understand verse 17, “Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of His purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, He confirmed it with an oath.” That is what God has promised will come true in your heart, in your life and in the life everlasting. Growing up in the faith means that you can realize that you have eternity with the Lord and in that forever you will know what you know today... and so much more.

OCTOBER 22

Credentialed Hebrews 7

I knew a doctor in another town of whom people said, “If you have to go to the Emergency Room, hope and pray he is on call.” This doctor was an MD from Mizzou. He had done all his work to be a physician and chose to live and work in a small town. For fun, on his day off from his family practice, he would go to an ER and fill in. His experience and his reputation for being both a thorough and no nonsense practitioner made him a much desired physician to the visitor to the ER. However, had he been all of that without the degree and clinical education, very few people would have preferred his work. His credentials were just as important as his professional approach.

From this chapter you can tell that some people were considering trusting Christ but were troubled by Jesus’ lack of credentials. To call Jesus a “priest” didn’t sit well with the tradition-laden Hebrew people. Priests were of the lineage of Levi, son of Abraham. They were in the tradition of Aaron, Moses’ brother. There was precedent for a king to come from Judah (also a son of Abraham) and the town of Bethlehem. It was the home of the great King David. However, that is not the proper credential for a priest. Credentials are important. Lineage and parentage are important.

Enter Melchizedek. He was confirmed to be a priest by Abraham. He received the prescribed offering from Abraham suggesting he had the credentials to be a priest. However, there was nothing in his parentage to suggest he was qualified. The Bible is not saying that he had no parents, as some claim. It is saying that he has no parents of note. He did not have the lineage necessary to claim the role of priest. However, the Lord recognizes Melchizedek’s authority and even proclaims him a priest throughout all eternity.

If there is precedent, then there can be credentials without the parentage. Jesus’ mother is from the tribe of Zebulun (another son of Abraham). Joseph, His earthly father, is from Bethlehem and the tribe of Judah. These are not the credentials necessary. However, His heavenly Father claims Him as THE Priest, capable of absolving all the sins of the people, not only now, but forever into eternity. You have a High Priest whose credentials are of the highest order. Give God thanks and praise.

OCTOBER 23

New

Hebrews 8

We all like “New.” That new car smell is wonderful. Let’s face it, it doesn’t smell that good. Molded plastic, new carpet and vinyl do not make for a great smell. It’s the new car that is so exciting to us. Though the scent isn’t great, it smells like success and accomplishment. That smells good. New is good.

My current truck is 22 years old. My previous truck was older. That old truck didn’t have power anything. Not windows, door locks, seats, etc. It didn’t have a tape deck and surely no GPS or MP3 player. It was just old. However, I got comfortable with that old truck. I drove it 10 of its 20 years and knew every little quirk of it. I knew how to shift (it was a stick) to optimize for gas mileage. My radio buttons were tuned in to the stations I prefer. I had grown quite comfortable... even if it didn’t smell “as good as new.”

The people of Israel had grown comfortable in an Old Covenant. It was broken, abused and not serving God’s purposes at all. However, the people just assumed that this was all there was and it didn’t get any better. When Jesus arrives on the scene to offer a New Covenant, they’re not so sure they want to change. The pew cushions fit them perfectly, thank you very much. We don’t need you rearranging the furniture. Even though this Old system isn’t set up well for us to see God, we like it just the way it is.

God offers us a completely new approach to His throne. The approach is through the sacrifice of the High Priest. That High Priest now takes the Covenant between you and God to a whole new level. Unlike a new car when the smell wears off, this is New forever. It is a Covenant that doesn’t exist in a temple with human priests as our intercessor. It exists within our hearts and minds. We can experience for ourselves and not sit back while someone else gets close to the Lord. Give God thanks today for the New Covenant He has provided.

OCTOBER 24

A Print

Hebrews 9

I have a picture in my office which is a pencil drawing of Old McKendree Chapel. I knew the artist before he died. At the time of the funeral, his son gave me the artwork. It's actually a print, not an original. A print is an authorized copy of the original. Each print is personally signed and numbered by the artist. The print has value as a limited edition copy, but it is not near as valuable as the original. Either way, you can see in the print, the whimsy of the artist as you see an actual landscape through his eyes. I've been to Old McKendree Chapel as well. It's a beautiful and historic location. The print is fun to look upon and I have a deep appreciation for the artist's portrayal, but it isn't anything like being there.

In this passage we find that the work of the priest in the temple was a human fabrication and representation of what is happening in the heavenly realm. God gave Moses a physical representation of the heavenly realm when He shared with Moses the details of the Tabernacle; the worship place from the book of Exodus. The Tabernacle was designed to be set up and torn down as they wandered through the wilderness. In Jesus' time there was a Temple that had been built with similar dimensions that had become the place of worship. It was all designed to be a sort of "print" of the original that exists in Heaven. It wasn't the original. Even though the items used in worship had great value (most were covered in gold) it was all just a copy of worship in the heavenly realm.

Worship today is the same. There will come a time when we pass from this life to the next. When that takes place we will enter into worship in a very real and amazing way. For now, we practice worship in a mere copy, an artist's rendition of the heavenly original. It is real. God is present in the copy. God can be found in the whimsy of the artists (preachers, singers, musicians, ushers, greeters, etc.) However, it's all a human rendition of what exists on the other side of this life. Do you love worship today? Traditional, contemporary, alternative; it doesn't matter which. Can you imagine how much you will find yourself deeply in love with the One you worship in the original place of worship?

OCTOBER 25

I'm Saved, So Now What?

Hebrews 10

One of the criticisms of Christianity is the perceived attitude that you can sin all week and then head to church on Sunday. At church you get your forgiveness, only to head back out into your week ready to sin again. It's a caricature of the faith life, but it may not be completely unfair. I've observed more than a few people who live their lives this way. It's as if they think their salvation fixes their spot in heaven and what they do from that point on doesn't matter. It's not a new concept, it existed in the early Christian church.

This chapter should serve as a frightening warning for us. Under the Old Covenant system, a person could sin, visit the temple with a sacrifice and go home absolved. That lifestyle of repetitive sacrifice made it possible to go on sinning... as long as you could afford it, I suppose. However, under the New Covenant there are no more sacrifices. Jesus made one final sacrifice; Himself. The warning appears in verse 26 and 27, "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God."

There has been a long tradition of interpreting verses such as this so as to instill deep seated fear in the lives of believers. Martin Luther and John Wesley both report having a sense of dread that even the most minor of offenses would land them in that "raging fire that will consume the enemies of God." Each of them also came to the comforting conclusion that we need to trust in the Grace of God after our salvation. We should allow God to continue to work within us to move us closer to the Holiness of heart He desires. However, it is also fair to say that deliberate sin grieves the heart of God and is not the mark of a follower of Jesus Christ.

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 127-129

OCTOBER 28

By Faith

Hebrews 11

“In God We Trust.” We know those words well. After all, they are inscribed on our currency. It’s an interesting irony within the separation of Church and State. In years past our money had a gold standard. That meant that for every dollar that was in circulation, there was a dollar’s worth of gold owned by the US and stored somewhere safe. Over time the gold standard has been set aside for a trust that the dollar will hold its value based upon the strength of the US economy. If you ask me, I think we need to pray regularly for the economy if we want to be able to buy a gallon of milk in the future.

We normally put our trust in things we can see and prove. I trust that what goes up will come down. Gravity has never let me down. I trust that my bank will have my money tomorrow since we have a system of insurance and governance that has been pretty reliable so far. Trust is one thing. Faith is something else completely. Faith is trusting in things that we cannot see or prove. Faith is taking a step forward by the Word of God and trusting that your foot will land on solid ground. Faith is your trust in God being put to the test. What do you trust God for?

In this passage, example after example is given of people who trusted God. “By faith...” each one of the persons listed in Hebrews 11 took a step in a direction that may not have made sense to the people around them. Build an ark, offer your son as a sacrifice, hide your son from Pharaoh’s death decree, defy your city leaders and hide spies in your home. Each of these is a step in faith that God will come through. In what ways is God calling you to take a step of faith, trusting His promises are true?

OCTOBER 29

Somebody's Watching Me **Hebrews 12**

Years ago a one-hit wonder named Rockwell sang a song with the lyrics "I always feel like somebody's watching me." (Those familiar with the song know that the background vocals were none other than Michael Jackson.) The paranoia in the song could cause anyone to look over their shoulder. Do you ever get that feeling? The feeling that crawls up the back of your neck and gives you shivers? Like a scary movie, you wonder who's behind the curtain or under the bed or around the next corner and behind the door. It doesn't help that someone once quipped that sometimes paranoid people ARE being followed.

I always wondered about the people who say that their deceased parents are looking down on them. While I love my children dearly, I hope heaven has more interesting sights to occupy my time than sitting on a cloud and watching my kids drive to work, clean the house and sleep all night. Two of my children are in the medical profession and I really don't want to see all the stuff they have to deal with. No thanks. Pastor Adam Hamilton portrays this situation well in a sermon on heaven when he says that he doesn't think that we sit around watching the events of the world in which we're no longer involved. However, he supposes that at certain times in the lives of our loved ones God will pull us aside and say, "I want you to see this. This moment in their life is one they would want you to be involved in." That's a special thought that I hope is reality. (Did you hear that dad or were you busy playing the back nine at the heavenly country club?)

In the previous chapter we were given a list of many of the heroes of the faith. Their personal lives serve as a witness to the great things God can do when people decide to trust Him in faith. In verse one of this chapter it speaks of being surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, these faith heroes. It's as if at the moment when we are about to make an important faith decision, a crowd of the faithful of the past has gathered to see what we will do. I don't think they are watching us in a way that should make us feel paranoid. They are gathered around like fans at a sporting event, yearning for us to perform in the faith to the very best of our ability. They've been there before and they are hoping to witness someone doing more than they.

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When you come to those crossroads of faith where a decision must be made, you are surrounded by supporters. They know the struggle and the fear. They also understand the rewards of a life of faith.

OCTOBER 30

Angel

Hebrews 13

It was a hot summer day and the highway was backed up. The old white four-door was on the shoulder with the hood up. I had time so I pulled over. There was a man and wife and I told them I'd take them down the road to a service station. The man said he'd already called and was awaiting a tow truck. His mother-in-law was in the back seat and they were headed for the hospital so she could have surgery. They were running late; could I take them? Sure, I said, as mother-in-law and daughter got in my car.

All along the way the mother-in-law breathed a prayer. "Thank You Jesus. Thank You for sending this angel. Thank You Jesus. Ohhhh thank You Jesus. You've sent Your angel to take care of me. Thank You Jesus." It was a short ride to the hospital but I was impressed how that prayer did not cease the entirety of the route. As she got out of the car she told me that I was an angel sent by God. I didn't bother to tell her I was an associate pastor sent by the senior pastor to visit a different hospital for a 6:00 am surgery for a member and at the moment my thoughts betrayed any possibility that I was an angel. Instead I just smiled and let her head into the hospital trusting that Christ had gotten her that far and would be with her the rest of her day's journey.

Angels are a curious thing. Verse 2 of this chapter states, "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it." The word "angel" literally means messenger from God. What I learned from my encounter with that woman that day is that the messenger doesn't even have to know they have the job. For that day, at that moment, during that car ride, I was delivering a message from God that He cared for her and wouldn't leave her during her hospital stay. I didn't have to say a word. I only needed to be faithful.

We're told to show hospitality to strangers as they may be delivering a message to us. However, they may look and act like normal human beings. They may not even know they are an angel in that moment. Angels don't have to be harp playing, winged creatures. They might be that homeless man in the park I sat to speak with last week or that guy I gave gas to the other day or a co-worker who said something that they didn't

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know was profound when it filtered through my ears. Messages from God are around you all the time. At times they come embodied in people who don't even know they have the job. If we're hospitable toward others though, the message will come.

OCTOBER 31

“I’ve Been Rich...”

James 1

Mae West, the inimitable actress and singer from the 1930’s, once quipped, “I’ve been rich and I’ve been poor. Believe me, rich is better.” I can’t say that I’ve ever really been poor, though there were some times in seminary that our income didn’t quite meet our expenses, but that’s not the same thing, is it?

If you’ve been reading along in the scripture all year, you may have noticed that being rich is not necessarily better in the eyes of God. Don’t make the mistake of thinking that God’s judgment is on the rich. Wealth is not the issue. As 1 Timothy 6 tells us clearly, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.” It’s not money that is the problem; it is the intense focus and attention that money gets. God recognizes that if you put half the time into accumulating and spending money as you do generously caring for the needs of others, then money isn’t the root of evil; it is the solution to it.

My dad always used to say, “It’s not what you make, it’s what your expenses are.” Most households today are spending close to or in excess of their income. This leaves zero room for generosity. It also leaves you tied up in the acquisition of more money, forgetting the good work God calls you to. Our scripture warns about being rich in verses 9-11 and I think it applies to about 99% of the readers today. Not that your cash flow is positive or that your savings are growing, but that you are living far above the poverty level of the vast majority of the world. Verse 27 tells us what proper exercise of faith looks like: “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.” The orphans and the widows were the poor and disadvantaged at that time. We still have the poor and disadvantaged with us. If your household is not in a position of generosity, you are in a position of receiving judgment. Biblically, you can’t get around that.

I do think it is biblical that God wants to bless you with abundance. That may not be all about physical abundance, but I think God would prefer to abundantly bless His children. I met a man who told me that he believed that God gave him the ability to earn “an obscene amount of money” so that he could give it away. He lived comfortably to be sure, but he also

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gave away about 25% of his annual earnings.

Where are you in your level of generosity? How can you position yourself to be a blessing toward those who are less fortunate and disadvantaged?

NOVEMBER 1

One With Christ

James 2

In our communion liturgy (the words we say) there is a prayer that is prayed by the pastor. The “official” words for United Methodists are “Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ that we may be for the world the body of Christ, redeemed by His blood. By Your Spirit make us one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory and we feast at His heavenly banquet.” If we are sincere in that prayer when we approach the Lord’s table, we are saying that we want unity with Christ. Maybe more than that, we are asking to become Christ to the world. You and I aren’t Jesus, but when our words and actions are aligned with Christ’s words and actions, Christ becomes alive in us and the world experiences Christ through us.

I bring this up because I was struck by verse 1 as I read it today. “My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.” In saying this, James is addressing us as Christ. Both the individual and the church are Christ to the world. We’re being taught that as we are Christ’s representation in the world we must say and do what Christ says and does.

This chapter ends with one of the more well-known catch phrases of the Christian faith, “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.” A more common way of saying it is “Faith without works is dead.” A great part of this chapter and not just this one, is devoted to the idea that you can’t say you’re a Christian without living it out. In so doing your words are shallow and fall on deaf ears.

Your words are a whisper but actions are a shout. There are people who are longing to experience Christ but they don’t trust us Christians. We haven’t had a great track record. Living as Christ lived means so much more than saying what you think they need to hear. President Teddy Roosevelt understood that when he said, “Speak softly and carry a big stick.” From a Christian perspective, let that stick be the wooden cross on which Christ sacrificed Himself for the world.

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 130-132

NOVEMBER 4

Speaking Wisdom

James 3

Martin Luther, the founder of the Protestant revolution of the 1500's and the father of the Lutheran movement, did not care for this book of the Bible. He called the book of James, "An epistle of straw." Epistle meaning "letter," he felt that James had written a book that was completely bereft of theology and therefore of no use. John Wesley, the Anglican priest and reformer who founded the Methodist movement, tried to find more of a middle ground with this text. Wesley was very much interested in "practical theology;" that is, the way that we put our belief system to work in our daily life. James is a letter on the "how to" of theology more than the "why."

As a pastor I am constantly aware of the words I use. What I say during a sermon is important. If I say something carelessly, I run the risk of losing my audience as their mind wanders to contemplate what I said or their feet wander as they leave the building offended. I also run the risk of having my words lead a person down the wrong track with relationship to God. Being unintentionally misleading while delivering a prepared message would not be very wise. What the preacher says is important, I believe.

Preachers are not the only ones who should measure their words. James offers this concern while referring to the tongue. How is it, he asks, that we can speak good things about God and bad things about our neighbor? He uses simple wisdom to say you can't get blood out of a turnip, water from a rock (unless you're Moses) or apples from an orange tree. Yet you can get words that injure from the same instrument that sings hymns of praise on a Sunday morning. "My brothers and sisters, this should not be."

Perhaps it is that our minds are capable of wisdom but our hearts are not in quite the same place. When we speak, our hearts overwhelm our mind in the race to put the words on our lips. Biblically speaking the heart is the place where the wisdom of God resides, when we allow it. What is God's wisdom? Verse 17 "But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere." Seek the wisdom of heaven and allow it to control your tongue.

NOVEMBER 5

Two Wolves

James 4

There's an old story that is attributed to the Native American culture. It goes something like this... A grandfather is talking to his grandson. He tells him, "There are two wolves at war within you. One represents all that is good in the world and one represents all that is evil." "Which one will win?" the grandson asks. To which the wise grandfather responds, "The one you feed."

The beginning of this chapter speaks to exactly this story. There are cravings at war within you. They are your desires, wants, dreams, and lusts. And then there is the desire to be Christ-like. Which desire will win? As the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, wrote about such things he didn't believe we have the ability to come out of such a war with Christ as our victor. He did, however, believe that if we dedicated our lives to Christ, our study of His Word (the Bible), worship and prayer, that Christ could defeat the enemy cravings within us.

Let's face it, we're going to feed the cravings. We watch TV, engage the digital world, and simply go through life in a consumer-driven culture where sex, gluttony, and self-aggrandizement are the stuff of all advertising. What parent among us can't tell you of the difficulty of getting through three months of Christmas advertising without our children making "I want..." the chant of the religion of "me"?

I've said many times before that the definition of sin is self-centeredness. This chapter outlines that reality. Christ overcomes our sin through His act on the cross and then through His activity in our lives. Allow Him to go to war against those cravings that drive you to sin.

NOVEMBER 6

Power Over Death

James 5

The Fountain of Youth is that legendary place where life-giving water flows. If you were to drink from it, you would not age. I don't know if it means you wouldn't age for a while or forever. I only know that the explorer Ponce De Leon bet his own life and that of his crew that it existed somewhere in Florida. Apparently they haven't found it yet, but there are still millions of mature Americans who flock to the peninsula in search of a younger life.

The other thing I'm not so sure about is if the search is about looking and feeling young until you die or is it to never grow old enough to die? By now, we've all figured out that we are going to experience the sting of death. No one gets out of this alive. Your body is engineered to fail. So when we read this chapter and it tells us "Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up." I begin to wonder if perhaps I'm doing this prayer thing wrong. I've prayed for plenty of people who have gotten better but probably just as many who have died. How is it that James promises that prayer, earnest and righteous prayer, heals people to the point that the Lord will raise them up and it doesn't always happen? I want that power over death... don't you?

I think the issue is that we are reading the Bible far too literally. James had witnessed good people die. He wasn't trying to fool anyone. Read farther down in the chapter to the last two verses. "My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins." James has seen good people who turned away from Christ, turned back to Christ, and subsequently die. Of that I'm sure. So what does it mean that they will be saved from death?

There's a clear difference in understanding the dying moment of a righteous person and a sinner. As followers of Christ we know that the righteous person breathes their last breath on earth and their next breath in the presence of a loving and caring God. The biblical witness is not so rosy for the sinner. They breathe their last breath and then... what? Death.

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NOVEMBER 6

There are too many images in the Bible to discern exactly what happens to the sinner. Hell, judgment, nothingness, separation from God? Who knows? What is clear is that the earthly death of the follower of Jesus Christ is only a transition to another life.

I know this is long but stay with me one more moment. Those last two verses tell you that you have the power over death. If your words, your life, your actions and your witness cause a lapsed follower to reconsider their trust in Christ, you have helped them conquer death. Strictly speaking it's their renewed relationship with Christ that does that, but you were the fountain that attracted them back. You have a monumental role in the lives of those who have fallen away. Use your power over death today to bring another back to Christ.

NOVEMBER 7

Strangers in a Foreign Land

1 Peter 1

I have been in seven airports in foreign lands. There is always a slight trepidation when I arrive. Will I be able to communicate with them? What if my paperwork is out of order and my French/German/Spanish/Hebrew are not quite up to par to get things right? Fortunately, in most of the countries I've landed, English is widely spoken by the customs agents. I have noticed, however, that they seem to have been trained to make it difficult for you at first to gauge your reaction in order to see if you might be bringing in something illegal or your paperwork may be fraudulent. I always seem to have that moment of fear when I can't understand them and then that relief as they smile and say "Welcome to my country."

One of the things I notice the most is the difference between the people. In Jamaica, I stood out for my skin color. In Cancun the native people are generally much shorter than I. The cultural differences are sometimes stark as well. People act differently, respond to conversations differently and have customs for greetings that are different in each country I've visited. I'm not intentionally different. I simply don't have to work on it. I wouldn't blend in well if I tried.

This is not the case in the Christian faith. In verse 16, Peter repeats a familiar line from the Old Testament that Jesus repeats as well: "for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."" Holy is a word that means different or set apart for a purpose. In verse 17 we are encouraged to "live out your lives as foreigners here..." Are you different because of your faith in Christ? Do you act differently? Do you stand out in a crowd? You have been set apart for the purpose of showing the world who Christ is. How are you doing?

Is it intended that you be a stranger to the cultural norms and ways of the people you live around? Too many Christians simply try to blend in. If people can't tell the difference between you as a follower of Christ and the people who are indigenous to your own culture, you may not be a follower of Christ. You're not supposed to fit in. You're supposed to offer a far better alternative to the life they are living. That's what Christ has done for you and that is what you are called to do for others.

NOVEMBER 8

Living Stones

1 Peter 2

I met an Orthodox Priest in Israel who proudly called himself “a living stone.” He is part of a priesthood who dates its heritage back to the people who walked and talked with Jesus while He was on earth. His people had been a part of ancient Israel and the many iterations of Palestine and all of the governing forces through the 2000 year history. What stood the test of time was that his people had been there. To him, they were as much a part of the country as the rocks that litter the ground all around the arid land of Israel.

As much as he was proud of his family heritage and that of his people, he was proud that they have been part of the faith for those 2000 years. He boasted that he and his family are the ones described in verse 5, “you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” I admired his faith and his claim to be a stone in the house that Christ is building.

As much as my acquaintance had claim to be a part of that house, you do as well. God, as the Master Builder of the Spiritual House we call Christ’s Church, has laid claim to you as a stone which is precious to Him. You are worthy of being a part of the house. You have just the right fit for just the right place in the wall of the house. You are not a stone that has been rejected, but rather one chosen for your value to God.

For today, take pride in knowing you have been chosen because God sees the great value in you. Give God thanks that you have a place in the spiritual house He is building.

Psalms reading for the weekend: Psalms 133-135

