

June 2017

Praying in Tough Times

**Readings,
Reflections,
Prayers
from Acts**

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This month we will journey with Paul through the most difficult times of his life: riots, arrest, five trials, imprisonments, hurricanes, shipwrecks, poisonous snakes ... Through it all, Paul prays. And God gets him through ... May God help us learn from Paul how stress and difficulties can bring us closer to God.

The prayers (mostly) are adapted from James S. Bell Jr & Tracy Macon Sumner, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Christian Prayers & Devotions* (don't let the title fool you – it actually is a very good anthology of prayers.).

Monday, June 5: Acts 14:1-20

In an old legend, two Greek gods, Zeus and Hermes, visited Lystra disguised as men. No-one knew who they were. Except for one older couple, people in the city treated them horribly. When Zeus and Hermes returned to Mount Olympus, they cursed everyone in the city, except for the elderly couple. The old folks were blessed. When the pair finally died, they were immortalized by the gods as two giant trees still standing at the city limits.

In Acts 14, Paul and Barnabas heal a lame man in the city of Lystra. The Lystrians, remembering the legend, were taking no chances this time. Maybe Zeus and Hermes had returned. So they shouted, *"The gods have come down again." "Zeus and Hermes are back."* The temple priest got everything prepared for a huge feast.

Few of us have ever been mistaken for gods. But sometimes in our lives others make a fuss over us and our heads swell a bit (supposedly we all have five minutes of fame). It's a dangerous position to be in – you can begin to believe you're super-special. History is full of ridiculous characters (media celebrities come to mind.) who thought they were so wonderful (above the law, more special than others, smarter than everyone else), only to discover they were very, very, human. We can think of all sorts of people whom our culture idolizes, whose lives are actually a mess, littered with broken relationships, addictions, health problems, and countless other stressors, disappointments, and disasters.

More often than praise, most of us feel like we are regularly cut down, criticized, and discouraged.

Have you had someone make a cutting remark about you or something you've done? Or someone looks at you in a funny way? Or someone doesn't call or write when you think they should? Or the email or text you receive seems a bit "edgy"? Even if we get positive feedback, one (possibly little) critical thing someone says cancels out all the good things other people have said. Why is that we can receive ten sincere compliments, and we fixate on the one little negative thing someone might have said about us?

Every counselor and mental health professional advises that we consciously make the effort **NOT** to get our sense of self worth from other people. There's a great saying by Eleanor Roosevelt which is very true - *"Remember, no-one can make you feel inferior without your consent"*

Paul and Barnabas knew they weren't gods. They said clearly: *"We, too, are only human like you."* They were honest with themselves and with others that they were not special. Paul and Barnabas routinely faced rejection, too. Yet they were secure enough in who they were that the insults and abuse people hurled (literally) didn't discourage them.

Scripture teaches that **WHO** you are is a special, unique, precious creation of God. In the words of Psalm 139:13-16: *"You created my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise You because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from You when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, Your eyes saw my unformed body."*

Also remember **WHOSE** you are – you are God's precious child. Jesus promised, *"I am with you always, to the very end of the age."* Paul comments, *"If God is for us, who can be against us? He did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all ... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors"*

through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:31-39)

That's good news for you and me. And it's good news for the world. Don't take those negative comments too seriously – keep them in balance with the encouragement you receive from others – and from God...

Who can you encourage today? Who can you bless with some kind words?

*Our walk with God is never a lonely walk,
it is a family occasion,
if taken in the company of God's children.
If we lag behind,
there are those who will turn and offer words of encouragement,
hold out a hand and offer assistance over stiles and other obstacles,
share refreshment,
help us from our knees when we stumble.
Our walk with God is never a lonely walk.
It is a joyful experience,
as along the path others join us,
attracted by the company of God's children,
singing the same songs of praise that angels sing,
following a path worn down by tears and joy, and sacrifice.
Our walk with God is never a lonely walk,
for he walks with us,
on a track that leads to a glorious destination.
Amen*

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Tuesday, June 6: Acts 14:21-28

If we pray, things will go well for us. Right? If things are hard, something must be wrong with our spiritual lives. Right? People who are suffering must have some "issues" they need to deal with, then all will be good. Right?

Throughout the Book of Acts, people who love and follow Jesus suffer. It's not because they have done anything wrong. In fact, they are people who suffer *because* they are faithfully following Jesus. If they were not actively trying to live and share their faith, they wouldn't have these problems.

Believing in and living for Jesus may make life more complicated: *"After preaching the Good News in Derbe and making many disciples, Paul and Barnabas ... strengthened the believers. They encouraged them to continue in the faith, reminding them that we must suffer many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God" (4:22-23).*

Peter Graystone writes, *"There are a few things that Christians are able to say (about suffering) with confidence. Firstly, you are not suffering because God hates you. Secondly, your suffering will come to an end, and there will be an eternity in which peace and justice will compensate you. And thirdly, knowing the presence of God alongside you will make you stronger as you face painful circumstances.*

The Christian faith teaches that God hates suffering. It was not part of his intention for humankind. However, he has created a world that has two features. Both these features are wonderfully beneficial to humans, but also result in a planet where suffering is inevitable.

First, the humans who are the part of creation that God loves are created capable of making choices. To a greater or lesser degree everyone chooses to do some bad things as well as some good things. Much of the suffering of the world is caused by humans in large numbers choosing together to do things that are evil. Wars,

poverty and hatred are not caused by God. They are caused by people who are rejecting the ways of God. Tragically, people who are entirely innocent often suffer most.

Second, the world is held in a delicate balance in which every part of creation is dependent on every other part. This is true from heaving oceans to microscopic seeds to meat-eating animals. Science calls this ecology. A planet that sustains human life as part of this glorious interdependent system needs certain features in its design. They include the movements of the planet's surface that set life in motion, but also cause terrible destruction through earthquakes and volcanoes. They include the viruses that bring death to humans but life to other parts of our ecology.

How do we know that God cares about this? Christians recognise that God's loving commitment to a suffering world was so great that he visited it in person. Jesus was God. He experienced the very best and very worst of being human - living, dying in hideous circumstances and overcoming death. All we know of Jesus leads Christians to believe that wherever there is suffering, there is a sense in which God is alongside each human, hurting with them. Although Christians find pain terrible and hard to understand, this belief allows them to cling to the possibility that suffering is not meaningless and death will not be the end."¹

Pray through the challenges in your life ... And pray for those you know who are having a tough time ...

*Beloved Jesus, look upon me with mercy,
Weighed down under the burden of my trials and sufferings,
I cast myself at Your feet.
Renew my strength and my courage,
while I rest here in Your Presence.
I give over to you all the worries, cares, and burdens I carry,
for only Your infinite goodness can sustain me;
only Your love can help me bear my cross;
only Your powerful hand can lighten its weight.
O Divine King, Jesus,
whose heart is so compassionate to the afflicted,
I wish to live in You;
and, if necessary, suffer for You.
Every moment, Lord, be my model and my support,
my hope and my refuge.
Amen*

Wednesday, June 7: Acts 15:1-35

Every parent knows there are guidelines children must be taught for their own safety and welfare. And so, out of concern and love for our children, we establish certain rules – boundaries – for our children's behaviour. The purpose of these guidelines is not to be petty or create an unnecessary burden, but to provide parameters for a responsible and rewarding life. For the child those guidelines, when obeyed, keep you safe. And they bring approval from a parent. The idea that obeying rules brings rewards is developed early.

No parent intends a child will obey only because they get rewards. The ideal is the child learns to obey out of trust, love and affection for the parent. But often, a "*Daddy-won't-love-me-unless-I-do-what-I'm-told*" and "*Mommy-loves-me-more-when-I-obey*" syndrome sets in. That results in two possible scenarios:

- (1) some children desire to please so much they make every effort to do what's expected: people-pleasers;
- (2) other children test every rule and break most of them to assert their independence and to test the extent of the parent's love: rule-breakers.

What if the child who has diligently kept every rule sees the other child break them? And then what happens if

¹ <https://christianity.org.uk/index.php/a/why-do-people-suffer-when-they-do-not-deserve-it.php>

the obedient child is told that the parent still unconditionally accepts and loves the disobedient child? The obedient child has inner conflict, because the parent is supposed to respond to how the child does or does not obey. It's just not fair.

Our sense of justice is often rooted in the "obey-to-please" principle. And we project it onto God as a cosmic parent figure. We have a sense that God ought to reward good behaviour and punish "sinners."

This understanding of right/wrong and reward/punishment existed in the church in Acts 15. God had given the Jews the Ten Commandments and other rules through Moses (see Exodus 20). They were good laws, designed for health and happiness (laws about hygiene, basic morality, relationships, and principles for how to relate to God). One of these specific laws that marked Jewish men as different from cultures around them (and the catch-all word and symbol for obedience to God) was circumcision. If you keep these rules, you're good with God; you can expect His blessing. If you don't keep them, you are sinning and bad things will happen to you ...

The conflict in this story is Christians with a Jewish background wanted the Gentiles (non-Jewish Christians) to play by the rules and keep the Law God had given in the Old Testament (symbolized by circumcision). They were sure this was what God required. They were angry Paul and others saying that God could love people when they didn't know or obey all the Old Testament rules (like circumcision). It just wasn't fair. How could God love people who were not circumcised, didn't observe all the rituals, and keep all the rules?

We all have our standards and values we think people should meet. Most of those standards are excellent; some are biblical; many are cultural. When people fail to keep **our** rules, it's difficult to believe they also know **our** Jesus. Some Christians insist that you cannot be a Christian unless you:

- experience a distinct "baptism of the Holy Spirit" and speak in a strange language;
- accept a particular theory of the end times, age of the earth, or other non-salvation doctrines;
- practice the same cultural traditions we do – for some people, absolute abstinence from alcoholic beverages, no dancing, no playing cards, etc.;
- (although they wouldn't come out and say it) if you don't dress the way they do;
- have your whole house in order – you have perfect children, perfect control of your temper, perfect house-keeping, perfect _____ ...

Jesus never said any of that. Paul and Peter have moved past that, too. What Jesus said is *"For God so loved the world that whoever **believes** in me shall not die but have eternal life."* (John 3:16). What Peter says is this, *"We **believe it is through grace** of our Lord Jesus Christ that we are saved, just as we are"* (15:11). Paul bends over backward to emphasize, *"It is **by grace we have been saved, through faith** – not because of anything we've done, it's the gift of God ..."* (Ephesians 2:8).

God reaches out His unconditional love to us. That is a wonderful gift. But He also challenges us to reach out with unconditional love to others. That is a real challenge. How can you do that, today? Pray about this ...

*God of healing, God of wholeness,
we bring our brokenness, our sinfulness, our fears and despair,
and lay them at your feet.
God of healing, God of wholeness,
we hold out hearts and hands, minds and souls
to feel your touch, and know the peace that only you can bring.
God of healing, God of wholeness,
this precious moment in your presence and power
grant us faith and confidence
that here broken lives are made whole.
Amen*

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Thursday, June 8: Acts 15:36-16:5

The Council of Jerusalem reaffirms the principle of unconditional love: God's unconditional love for us and unconditional love for one another. So far, so good. But sometimes there is a gap between theory and practice. A great principle, like unconditional love, is easy to talk about; it can be hard to live it out in real relationships.

Paul is discovering this. Paul and Barnabas were good friends who were perfectly suited for one another in their talents, temperaments and gifts. They complemented one another well. They needed one another. Yet when Barnabas in his customary forgiving, accepting, affirming way wanted to take his cousin, a young man named Mark, along on their next journey, Paul balked. Barnabas was determined he was going to take Mark. Paul was just as determined that Mark was not coming.

Paul didn't want John Mark because he had failed them once before (15:38). Mark couldn't handle the pressures of travel or persecution. He had run away. Barnabas wanted to give him a second chance. Paul felt that Mark had had his one chance. Where was this unconditional love Paul had talked about at the council? All those noble virtues Paul had just defended were forgotten. Paul was wrong. He made a mistake. (See [Matthew 18:21-35](#))

This is not the end of the story. Toward the end of Paul's life, he is imprisoned in Rome. He makes three comments about Mark, all saying Mark is now a close friend (2 Timothy 4:11, Philemon 1:24, Colossians 4:10). We have no idea what happened. Perhaps, as Mark travelled with Barnabas, he proved his faithfulness. Perhaps Paul, in a more reflective moment, recognized how wrong his response was, apologized, and gave Mark a second chance. Or perhaps both things happened. Whatever happened, Paul's mistake was corrected.

Unconditional love and forgiveness must have gone both ways: Paul forgave Mark for his failings, and Mark must have forgiven Paul his quick temper and judgmental nature.

It takes strength of character to admit you are wrong. Paul is a classic "task-oriented" person – someone for whom the job at hand always came first, and if people got hurt along the way, so be it. But in the Kingdom of God people come before tasks. No programme, job, task, or great idea is created in the image of God. People are. Paul learns this life lesson; unfortunately other people are hurt along the way. How does that challenge us?

Those of us who are Christians hold up high standards for our behaviour, but all of us fall short at some point. We aspire to great virtues like perfect honesty, complete integrity, purity of speech, as well as unconditional love ... but, on occasion, we blow it. Our challenge is to reflect on how we act/what we say and honestly ask if they are consistent with our Christian values or not. If not, we need to confess, repent, and change.

Are there relationships in your life where you struggle with unconditional love? Or are there relationships which have suffered because you have been so caught up in doing things? Have people failed you and you've had a hard time giving them another chance? When you handle situations at work or at home, do you react **Christian-ly**? Is there something you need to deal with? Do it ... today. Pray through this ...

*Unclutter our lives, Lord, we have too much,
consume too much, expect too much.
Grant us perspective:
to see this world through others' eyes than just our own.
Grant us compassion:
where there is need to play our part, not turn aside.
Grant us gratitude:
for what we have, our daily bread, the gift of life.
Unclutter our lives, Lord,
give us space, simplicity, thankful hearts.
Amen*

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Friday, June 9: Acts 16:6-15

We know we are supposed to share our faith. We know we ought to be "missional." But practically what does that mean? How do we share our faith?

Look at what happened just outside of Philippi. Paul and his companions join a group of people. Someone probably asked who they were and where they had come from. So, Paul begins to talk. What does he say? He would have filled them in on his story – how he was a leader in the Jewish community, how he had persecuted Jesus but now he believed and followed Him, how God led them to come to Macedonia, and how they expected God would do things in Greece. Undoubtedly his honest enthusiasm and sincerity would have come through.

One woman, named Lydia, listened intently. *"The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message."* She listened to Paul talking about what God had done in his life. How he had come to believe. How God had kept him safe and guided him. The **Holy Spirit** impressed upon her heart that this same God wanted to be her Saviour. And she believed. She and others who believed were baptized.

All of us have some experience with God. We can tell stories about how we came to believe, and how God has protected, guided us and cared for us. We can talk about what God means to us today. We can say God is **the most important** person/thing in our lives. Like Paul, our natural response to all this experience ought to be to share God's grace in a very natural, ordinary way.

Notice what did NOT happen in this account:

- Paul was not preaching. Lydia and her companions became Christians when someone took the time to speak with them on-on-one or in a small group. They became Christians when individuals who knew God shared their personal experiences of what God meant to them. This is humbling for preachers ☺.
- Paul and his friends spent time with them. This was more than a five-minute conversation.
- Paul did not convert anyone. The text makes it clear that Paul's words did not lead these people to faith in Jesus. *"The Lord opened her heart ..."* The Spirit of God is the One who led people to faith in Jesus.

Jesus, quoted in John 16:7-11, says *"When the Holy Spirit comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment ..."* It is the Holy Spirit who does the convicting and the converting.

Talking about sharing our experiences with Jesus assumes we have had some experiences with Jesus. If we have not yet made that choice to believe, or we have not invited Jesus to journey with us, we may not have much to talk about. This may be the time to listen to that small voice (the Spirit) who is inviting you to trust in Jesus and make a new start.

We may know Jesus and have experiences with God, but we're hesitant to talk about them for lots of reasons. (What are your reasons?) Pray. Perhaps we don't know when it's appropriate to share our faith – pray. We don't know who to share our faith with – pray. We don't know what to say – pray. It sounds trite, but prayer really helps. C.S. Lewis comments, *"I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time – waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God – it changes me."*

After you have prayed, do it. We can always find reasons not to speak to someone else. But when you find yourself starting to think of excuses ... DON'T. Talking about our faith in Jesus can be difficult at first, but it becomes more natural with time. As you share your experience of God with someone, your words become part of that person's life. They may believe right away – or not. It may take a long while to sink in. That's God's responsibility. You have made an eternal contribution to someone's life.

Your words may make all the difference in the world to that person. And then they tell two people. Who each tell two people. Who each tell two people ... you get the picture. Pray that God would give each of us the wisdom, courage, and opportunity to share His love and grace ...

*God of the high and holy places,
 where I catch a glimpse of your glory,
 above the low levels of life,
 above the evil and emptiness which drags me down,
 beyond the limits of my senses and imagination,
you lift me up.
 In the splendor of a sunset, in the silence of the stars,
 in the grandeur of the mountains, in the vastness of the sea,
you lift me up.
 In the majesty of music, in the mystery of art,
 in the freshness of the morning,
 in the fragrance of a single flower,
you lift me up.
 Awe-inspiring God, when I am lost in wonder and lost for words,
 receive the homage of my silent worship.
 But do not let me be content to bear your beauty and be still.
 Go with me to the places where I live and work.
 Lift the veil of reticence behind which I hide.
 Give me the courage to speak of the things which move me,
 with simple and unselfconscious delight.
 Help me to share my glimpses of glory until others are drawn to your light.
 Lord lift me up that I may lift you up.
 Amen.*

Jean Mortimer

Saturday, June 10: Acts 16:16-40

We want our friends, our family members, our neighbours, our colleagues to know Jesus as their Saviour. And we try, by the way we live, our gracious words, and our prayers to make a difference. But what is it we're trying to communicate? What is the "gospel"? What is the "good news"? What do people need to believe?

Karl Barth, one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century (and author of many books hundreds or even thousands of pages long) was visiting the University of Chicago. The eminent scholar was asked, "*Dr. Barth, what is the most profound truth you have learned in your studies?*" Without hesitation, he replied, "*Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.*" That's the good news right there – "*Jesus loves you.*"

During a conference on comparative religions, leading experts debated what, if any, belief was unique to Christianity. They began eliminating possibilities. Other religions had versions of gods appearing in human form. Other religions believed in life after death. The story goes that C.S. Lewis wandered in, "*What's the rumpus about?*" When he heard their dilemma, Lewis responded, "*Oh, that's easy. It's grace.*" Grace is simply love, free of charge, no strings attached – Jesus loves you, just as you are. That's what Paul shares (Acts 16:31).

It is nice to say that God loves me, but He doesn't know me, does He? That may have been what the jailer was thinking. Jailers in those days were **not** known for being "good" or "nice" people – rather the opposite. But Paul has credibility. He knows, first hand, about God's grace. Paul was one of those responsible for the murder of Stephen. Paul was responsible for Christians being beaten, thrown into prison, and worse. God's grace had come to Paul, with all his violent, intolerant, cruel, and merciless past. Paul could share that with the jailer.

Paul's message to the jailer in Philippi (and our message to the world around us) is that God loves each one of us no matter our past. There is nothing we can do to make God love us less. There is also nothing we can do to make God love us more. This may be more difficult for some of us to accept.

We can turn the good news into bad news by adding all sorts of rules and regulations to it: people have to believe specific doctrines or do particular things in order to be saved. AFTER we are saved, the Spirit does

challenge us to deal with lots of issues in our lives. These are changes we make in obedience to God's Spirit, AFTER we put our trust in Jesus. The good news is simply this – "*Jesus loves you.*"

Paul writes: "*I used to scoff at the name of Christ. I hunted down his people, harming them in every way I could. But God had mercy on me because I did it in ignorance and unbelief. Oh, how kind and gracious the Lord was. He filled me completely with faith and the love of Christ Jesus. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – and I was the worst of them all. But that is why God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life*" (1 Timothy 1:13-17). That's the good news. God loves you.

God loves _____ (you fill in the blank with someone (or several people) you know.). Pray for them.

*Dear Jesus, help me to spread your fragrance everywhere I go.
Flood my soul with your spirit and love.
Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly
that all my life may only be a radiance of yours.
Shine through me and be so in me that every soul I come in contact with
may feel your presence in my soul.
Let them look up and see no longer me but only Jesus.
Stay with me and then I shall begin to shine as you shine,
so to shine as to be a light to others.
Amen*

Mother Teresa

Sunday, June 11: Acts 17:1-15

After the service, most people politely shook my hand and chatted about the weather. A few said, "*Good sermon, Pastor.*" But one lady buttonholed me. "*I don't believe what you said in your sermon,*" she blasted. "*show me in the Bible where it says that.*" She was not going to be brushed off lightly. I was ... thrilled. She had been listening. (And, yes, I could show her in the Bible where it "said that")

Acts 17:11 contains a phrase every pastor wishes were true of every sermon. As Paul taught and preached to folks in **Berea** they "*they received the message with great eagerness and **examined the Scriptures** every day to see if what Paul said was true.*" I get excited when people listen, think, and ask questions. They're awake.

Previously, Paul and his friends were in **Thessalonica**. On three Sabbath days "*he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead. 'This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Messiah,' he said.*" Some people in Thessalonica were convicted by Scripture the good news was true. Most weren't. People either responded in faith or outright hatred. Few were neutral.

In Thessalonica, Paul's opponents didn't have any good arguments from Scripture. They simply "*were jealous.*" Had they examined the Scriptures, they might have been persuaded as well. But that would mean thinking and possibly changing what they believed. Unlike the Bereans, the Thessalonians didn't want to think. They didn't want to read. They got defensive and angry. Sometimes change is threatening so we put up walls.

With all sorts of Christian books/videos/speakers/podcasts out there, we may never actually read the Bible for ourselves, either. We may hear about/read about/watch videos about Christianity. Sometimes we are surprised that when we do read the Bible, what it actually says. Or doesn't say. We may have to change, too ...

What surprises you as you actually read the Bible? What questions do you have? (If they're hard, ask Stephen, Mark, or Kyle, but not me ... just kidding). Search the Scriptures ... Be open to change ... Pray for wisdom ... (And yes, you can ask me tough questions, too ☺)

*How simple for me to live with You, O Lord.
How easy for me to believe in You.
When my understanding is perplexed by doubts or is on the point of giving up,
when the most intelligent people see no further than this day's end
and do not know what must be done tomorrow,
You grant me the calm confidence that You exist,
and that you will take care that there is always one good path to follow ...
From the giddy heights of earthly fame, I look back in wonder
at the path which I alone could never have found,
a wondrous path that led me through hopelessness and despair to this point
from which I can help other people see the radiance of Your glory.
And whatever I, in this life, can share, may it be You and You alone.
Amen*

Alexander Solzhenitsyn

Monday, June 12: Acts 17:16-34

My friend, Hasbullah, came from Sri Lanka. He was nominally Moslem, but didn't practice his faith. He knew nothing at all about Jesus or Christianity. We had some wonderful conversations about life, the universe, and everything, including Jesus. Sometimes we run across people, like Has, who don't know a thing about Jesus. They have none of the knowledge we might assume people have about the Jesus, Bible, God, etc. And so we start talking about God with them from a different place than with a person who has some Christian background.

Paul found himself in this situation as he moved from Thessalonica and Berea (in Macedonia) to Athens (in Greece). In the Macedonian cities, Paul was dealing with Jews and God-fearing Greeks who knew the Scriptures (they checked up on him day by day – Acts 17:11). In Athens, he was speaking with Greeks who, if they had ever even heard of the Jewish Scriptures, were not familiar with them.

Almost everyone in Athens was "spiritual." There were signs of religion everywhere. Paul noticed they even had an altar dedicated *"To an Unknown God."* He could have lambasted them for not believing in the true God. But he didn't. His starting point was positive; he established common ground: *"I'm thrilled to see you believe in God – let me tell you what I've discovered this God is like."* People wanted to know more ...

There are similarities between ancient Athens and 21st Century Canada. "Spirituality" is still common. Poll after poll show the majority of Canadians still believe in a "God" of some sort. They may not believe in our God, but they do believe "spirituality" is real. If people know of the Bible, they are not familiar with what it really says (though they may think they know what it says).

How do we speak to these people? They don't want theology. What they do want is for us to share our personal experiences with God. When we talk with them about what we have experienced, they are intrigued. I've also found it's helpful to build common ground, appreciating their spiritual search. Trying to prove them wrong or attacking them because they aren't yet Christians is NOT helpful.

For instance, as a geographer, I find that many people have a deep sense the world is more than just a cosmic "accident" caused by the random collision of atoms billions of years ago. It's just too amazing and finely tuned. Paul explores that theme as common ground (Acts 17:24-27). The Greeks knew all sorts of things about the natural world and human beings; Paul uses that as a point of contact to share his faith. In our world, people are still in awe of creation. When we see a gorgeous sunrise, it moves us. When a baby is born, it is still a spiritual moment. When someone comes through major surgery it is still a "miracle." These are opportunities to help people ask the question: *"Don't you ever wonder why ... What does it all mean ...?"*

God has also given human beings the ability to create amazing works of art, literature, music, and insight. Where does that genius come from? Ultimately it comes from God. Paul cites a non-Christian poet to help him speak with the folks in Athens (Acts 17:28). Sometimes we can build bridges with family, friends, or neighbours by

seeing the opportunities to build bridges through non-Christian songs, books, art, movies, quotes, etc., too.

All the bridges Paul is building with the folks in Athens – their sense of something more, their wonder about creation, their appreciation of genius – were leading up to this: ***God has revealed Himself to the world through Jesus Christ.*** Unlike every other religion we have a wonderfully clear picture of what God is like: Jesus. He loves us: He chose to come to earth for us and He was even willing to die for us, all because of His incredible love. We want people to meet Jesus, as well. We do need to ensure we are introducing them to the Jesus of the Bible, not some of the strange “church-y” versions of Jesus that are out there.

We have good news to share. Continue to pray that God will give you opportunity to share His love ...

*Thank you, Lord, for being there for me
and allowing me to cry out to you in my times of need.
It is amazing to me that the Lord of the Universe would take time to listen to me
and to care about what I say.
God, there are things happening around me right now that I do not understand.
Some of these things make me feel weak, helpless and afraid.
Even in the midst of this, I know that you are the Lord.
I know that the situation is in Your hand, and I trust You.
I pray for strength and for wisdom that I would be able to endure this situation
and be able to handle it in a way that would bring glory to Your name.
In Jesus' name.
Amen.*

Tuesday, June 13: Acts 18:1-23

No one is called to follow Jesus on their own. We are called to follow Jesus in community, in the family of God's people. Yes, we need to accept Him as our Saviour and follow Him as our Lord ***personally***. But when we make that commitment we become part of a ***community*** of disciples – followers of Jesus, the church. We (ideally) love one another, honour one another, encourage one another, help one another, care for one another, correct one another, do not judge one another, instruct one another, serve one another, bear one another's burdens, and do not grumble against one another nor slander one another. What a great gift.

Paul is a wonderful example of someone who appreciates community. Working with folks like Priscilla, Aquila, Timothy and Silas, Paul is supported emotionally, spiritually, and financially. And, as friends and colleagues, these folks can complement one another by using their unique gifts and abilities so that no one person must “do it all” (Paul, for instance, could give his time to what he does well: teaching and preaching)

As we come up to the summer, how are you connecting with other followers of Jesus? How are you connecting in the church? Do you have friends or a group to support you? To whom you can give support? If so, great.

Over the summer it is easy to get “disconnected” as we scatter and travel – how can you keep connected with other believers? Stay connected personally or (at worst) through email, texts, Facebook, Twitter ... whatever.

Watchman Nee (in Chinese, Ni Tuosheng, 1903–1972) was a church leader and Christian teacher in China. In 1922, he initiated church meetings in Fuzhou, beginning the house church movement. Following the Communist Revolution, Nee was persecuted and imprisoned for his faith and spent the last twenty years of his life in prison. He wrote, *"Alone I cannot serve the Lord effectively, and He will spare no pains to teach me this. He will bring things to an end, allowing doors to close and leaving me ineffectively knocking my head against a wall until I realize that need the help of the Body as well as of the Lord."*

How are you doing at using your gifts, talents, and abilities to serve God? Feel free to talk with the staff or others, too, about how you can use your energy, talents, and skills to serve God.

*Lord, because you have made me,
 I owe you all of my love.
 Because you have redeemed me,
 I owe you all of myself.
 Because you have promised so much,
 I owe you all of my being.
 Lord, please make me taste by love what I taste by knowledge.
 Let me know by love what I know by understanding.
 I owe you more than my whole self,
 but all I can give you is all that I am.
 Draw me to you, Lord, in the fullness of love.
 I am wholly yours by creation.
 Make me all yours, too, in love.
 Amen.*

Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109)

Wednesday, June 14: Acts 18:24-28

Once in a while, someone says to me, "**Your** church does ..." or "I like **your** church because ..." This always makes me very uncomfortable because First Baptist is not **my** church (or **your** church); it is **God's** church. If I think of First Baptist as **my** church (or if others think of it as **Bruce's** church), then whether the church is "going well" or not, whether it is "good" or not, is all up to **Bruce**. The focus is on Bruce because it is "**Bruce's church**". This is VERY frightening – for all of us. (The movie, *Bruce Almighty*, shows how terrifying this could be ...)

But when we keep the focus on our church as **Jesus'** church, then our focus is where it ought to be – on **Jesus:** His Kingdom, His glory, His mission, His Way. When we read about the various churches in Paul's travels (there are all sorts of places mentioned in this reading), notice they are not "*Paul's churches*" but *Jesus' churches*. Paul may have been instrumental in starting many of them, but a whole host of people are now serving God and building the Kingdom of God through them. And ultimately, their Lord is Jesus. "*Faith looks not at what happens to him but at Him Whom he believes,*" writes Watchman Nee. We need to keep that perspective.

When I think of First Baptist, I celebrate the incredible diversity of people who help in so many ways. Thank you. But this reading is also an ongoing reminder of how the Kingdom of God only grows as all of us contribute our time, talents, and treasures to His work. Paul could not possibly do it all in Corinth, Ephesus, Achaia, etc. No minister (or church staff) can possibly do it all, either.

Please pray that God would help us discern the right volunteers for our summer and fall programmes (especially nursery, children, and youth). Is God calling you in a new way? Pray about it. Talk about it. No one is too old, too young, too over-qualified, or too under-qualified to serve God. He created you ... and He needs you.

*Our heavenly Father,
 we pray that your blessing may rest on each of us who profess to be Christians.
 Lord, help us to love Christ more than we love ourselves.
 Help us to be more like him in our way of life.
 Help us, Lord, to walk humbly, prayerfully,
 consistently on, in the dust of our pilgrimage
 so that others may not stumble over us and say,
 "They profess only, but they never do anything."
 God, help us to live up to what we profess, through you, in Christ Jesus,
 and may it be shown in each one of us.
 Give us compassion for our world,
 that we may share this love of Christ with those around us,
 In Word, in Deed, in all ways. Amen*

D.L. Moody (1837-1899)

Thursday, June 15: Acts 19:1-22

This reading highlights some of the exciting things that happen in Ephesus (in western Turkey), one of the largest and most important cities of its day (estimated to have a population, then, of 500,000+). The first encounter (19:1-7) involves some people who were not yet Christians; they were followers of John the Baptist (Jewish people who had repented of their sins, but did not know about Jesus). As soon as they hear about Jesus, they put their faith in Him, are baptized, and are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

- When a person puts their faith in Jesus, their normal response ought to be to be baptized – an outward expression of the inward transformation that has taken place. This is the normal response to Jesus throughout the New Testament. Have you been baptized? Great. If not, why not ...?
- When a person puts their faith in Jesus, Jesus' response is to bless them with a deep experience of the Holy Spirit's presence in their lives.
- The church in Ephesus is a strong one; we assume these people joined with the other believers after meeting with Paul – he certainly would have encouraged them to (and they had learned the hard way that staying separated meant you missed important things – like Jesus and the Holy Spirit.).

The pattern in Scripture is that as a person puts their faith in Jesus, they experience the Holy Spirit, they are baptized, and they join the church. Speak to a pastor if you have questions ...

Paul spends at least two years in Ephesus, speaking about the Kingdom of God. God did "extraordinary" miracles through Paul (v.11). These unusual events are unique affirmations of Paul's calling as an apostle, specifically in Ephesus; not even Paul replicates these at other times or places. These are not normal things we can expect anywhere and everywhere (much to the chagrin of some televangelists). God demonstrates His power in unique ways in each place, through each person, to bring people to faith in Jesus.

God can work through each of us – in unique ways in our unique situations – to bring people to faith in Jesus, too. It won't be OUR power; it will be GOD's power. We never know what He's up to.

God's Kingdom grows in unexpected ways through us (or even despite us). Praise God. Pray for our church, that together we may be a good witness in our community. And pray for yourself (and others) personally, that God may help us to share our faith in Jesus with others ... in His power, not ours.

*We are born in hope,
Raised in hope,
Nurtured in hope,
Loved in hope,
Comforted in hope,
Suffer in hope,
Endure in hope,
Overcome in hope.
Hope in the One who has endured all things,
that we might know freedom.
Hope in the One who has given us his Spirit,
that we might have power.
Hope in the One who has loved us beyond death,
that we might have life.
Hope in the One who prepares a place for us,
that we might share eternity with him.
For hope that endures,
we thank you Lord,
Amen.*

faithandworship.com

Friday, June 16: Acts 19:23-41

Ephesus was the home of the stupendous Temple of Artemis (one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world). Tourism to the temple was big business. Souvenirs – miniature statues of Artemis and the temple – provided a good income to local craftspeople. Demetrius and his friends sense a threat to their livelihoods if Christianity were to catch on. They take action. Long before police forces, the riot they incited was potentially lethal; Paul and his companions could have been lynched (probably exactly what Demetrius and his cronies wanted).

The city clerk's intervention is fascinating. There is no evidence he is a Christian (he probably he worships Artemis; he speaks sincerely about the myth that a statue of Artemis fell from heaven in Ephesus, proving her desire to dwell in the city). God uses this man from a different religion to save Paul's and his friends. God can "use" all sorts of people to build His Kingdom, even those who don't yet know Him.

God's Holy Spirit is at work in people around you who are not yet Christians. He is speaking into their souls, pricking their consciences, casting doubts into their minds, softening their hearts, inspiring them to be compassionate ... pray for them. So often we give up on people ... don't. Never give up on anyone. God doesn't. His Spirit continues to speak into people's lives ... God encourages us to pray for those around us ...

*God of love, we pray that you give us love:
love in our thinking, love in our speaking, love in our doing,
and love in the hidden places of our souls;
love of our neighbours, near and far;
love of our friends, old and new;
love of those who we find it hard to bear,
and love of those who find it hard to bear with us;
love of those with whom we work,
and love of those with whom we take our ease;
love in joy, love in sorrow;
love in life and love in death.
In the end, may we be worthy to dwell with you, who are eternal love –
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – forever and ever.
Amen.*

William Temple (1881-1944)

Saturday, June 17: Acts 20:1-12

Have you ever been angry? Afraid? Confused? After the trauma of this riot, I'd be angry, afraid, and confused. What would you do? I'd be stressed. I'd leave town.

What does Paul do? Paul encourages people.

Have you ever noticed that if you brood on your problems they become overwhelming. But if you spend time talking with and encouraging people your own problems disappear?

We all appreciate a good dose of encouragement now and then. Isn't it amazing how much a sincere "encouraging word" means to you? Isn't it incredible how much people appreciate our encouragement? If encouragement is so important, why don't we do it more? Why is our encouragement so few and far between? (After all, in southern Alberta we live in "a home, were the buffalo roam, and the deer and the antelope play; where seldom is heard a discouraging word (OK, maybe not so much that one) and the skies are not cloudy all day." I'd like to change the lyrics to "often is heard an **encouraging** word ..." What do you think?)

Why not become an encourager??? Every day, think and pray about one person you could encourage – for anything (as long as it's genuine). And do it. In a culture that loves to find faults with people and cut people down, genuine encouragers can make such a difference. Encouragers build the Kingdom of God.

The story of Eutychus (told to us by Luke, a doctor and eye-witness of the event) describes an evening worship service at Troas. Again, God provides an extraordinary, unique miracle to underline the authenticity of Paul's ministry. God works His own miracles in His own time and His own way. Part of our growth as believers is celebrating and rejoicing when God does incredible things like miracles. But we also gracefully accept when God allows the natural course of events to unfold and doesn't intervene. As maturing Christians, we learn "God is God" even when we do not understand what He is up to ... As Barbara Johnson quips, "I'm glad God has all the answers, 'cause I barely understand the questions."

*O God our Father,
help us all through this day so to live that we may bring help to others,
credit to ourselves and to the name we bear,
and joy to those that love us, and to you.
Help us to be cheerful when things go wrong;
persevering when things are difficult;
serene when things are irritating.
Enable us to be helpful to those in difficulties;
kind to those in need;
sympathetic to those whose hearts are sore and sad.
Grant that nothing may make us lose our tempers;
nothing may take away our joy;
nothing may ruffle our peace;
nothing may make us bitter towards anyone.
This we ask for your love's sake.
Amen.*

William Barclay (1907-1978)

Sunday, June 18 (Father's Day): Acts 20:13-38

Paul senses his impending arrest and persecution. Note his courage and determination: he is not afraid to suffer for his faith. Honestly, I would struggle to be as courageous as Paul. How about you?

This is the *only* speech in Acts directed to a **Christian** audience; all the rest are evangelistic messages to non-believers or courtroom defense speeches. Today we do well to hear what Paul says to **us** :

- He begins with what "you know"(v.17, 20): things that have been obvious to everyone: the integrity of his life, perseverance, courage, and message (would these be evident in your life?);
- He shares his own heart ("I know"[v.23, 25]); things only he has known: his suffering, hardships, loneliness and heartache (being a Christian is NOT easy, sometimes, is it??.);
- He gives instruction: the importance (for pastors, and for all God's people) to "keep watch over themselves"(what does that mean for you?) and to "keep watch over the flock"(pastors have special oversight of the church, but there **are** people in your life who are "your flock" – family members, friends, neighbours, relatives, small group members. What does this mean for you?)
- He gives a warning: "wolves" will come. Wolves can be those who teach false doctrine. Or they can be those who are orthodox but stir up conflict and controversy in the church (read Titus, 1 & 2 Timothy, Revelation 2:1-7 [God's letter to **this** church, in Ephesus]). Pray for unity in our church;
- He gives a commission (vs. 32): we have the privilege – and responsibility – to be God's ambassadors, wherever we are. Pray for God's courage and opportunity;
- He gives us encouragement: God will supply all our needs. Praise Him.

We are all God's people. Pray for our church.

We are the church. Pray that God would give us a bigger vision of what it means that His Kingdom and His will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

*O God, Our Father, we know our own weaknesses,
 Our minds are darkened, and by ourselves we cannot find and know the truth.
 Our wills are weak, and by ourselves we cannot resist temptation,
 or bring to its completion that which we resolved to do.
 Our hearts are fickle, and by ourselves we cannot give to you the loyalty which is your due.
 Our steps are faltering, and by ourselves we cannot walk in your straight way.
 So this day we ask you to enlighten us and strengthen us,
 to guide us, that we may know you, and love you, and follow you all the days of our life.
 Give to your Church your blessing and your protection.
 Guide her in her thinking, that she may be saved from heresies which destroy the faith.
 Strengthen her in her witness, that she may bring no discredit on the name she bears.
 Inspire her in her fellowship, that those who enter her
 may find within her your friendship and the friendship of your people
 Amen.*

William Barclay (1907-1978)

Monday, June 19: Acts 21:1-16

We may find ourselves in hard places. In our lives, difficult things happen. The Spirit leads Paul into tough places. The details of Paul's experiences are different than ours. But we share with Paul (and with Jesus) times when life is hard. We can learn from Paul as, in relationship with Jesus, he works through stress ...

Paul's journey to Jerusalem is not unlike Jesus': like Jesus, Paul sets his face resolutely to go on to Jerusalem and, like Jesus, doesn't allow predictions of suffering to deter him. He is "*compelled by the Spirit*" even though the Spirit "*warns me that prison and hardships are facing me*" (Acts 20:22-23). Acts 21:1-16 continues to show us Paul's determination to follow the hard path down which the Holy Spirit is leading him. What can we learn?

Sometimes the Spirit allows bad things to happen. He may NOT deliver us from every difficulty or suffering.

Sometimes God actively leads us into stress and difficulty. Can your faith accept that? This is Paul's experience. God is leading him into suffering. Paul and his friends can see **NO** good in his journey to Jerusalem: Paul's ministry of encouragement, church planting, and evangelism will end. Couldn't he do so much more if he stayed free? What they cannot anticipate is the influence Paul will have on Roman leaders and the letter-writing ministry he will have in prison (Paul will write Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon in jail). When hard times happen, or God actively leads you into stressful circumstances, He is not being petty or cruel. Through those most difficult times, the Holy Spirit can do things **in you** and **through you** that you cannot possibly imagine ...

In all times God is with us: God is with us through hard events in life.

As Paul walks this hard road, what keeps him going? His resolute faith in God **and** people: the friends he travels with and companions he meets along the way. Christian friends – who share our faith, hope, and values – are so important. The church community is so important. Who can you meet with to encourage – and to be encouraged by – this week? During tough times, we all need Christian companions to walk with us ...

*May I become, at all times, both now and forever
 a protector for those without protection,
 a guide for those who've lost their way,
 a ship for those with oceans to cross,
 a bridge for those with rivers to traverse,
 a sanctuary for those in danger,
 a lamp for those without light,
 a place of refuge for those who lack shelter,
 an encouragement for those who are discouraged,
 and a servant to all in need. Amen.*

Tuesday, June 20: Acts 21:17-26

How do Christians handle their differences? When Paul (spokesman for the Gentile/non-Jewish Christians) meets with James (leader of the church in Jerusalem/spokesman for the Jewish Christians) the “fur could fly” (reread Acts 15). Many Jewish Christians felt non-Jewish (Gentile) believers must follow all the Jewish law, including circumcision, observing the feasts, food laws, etc., etc. And they were not about to back down. Paul, however, taught salvation by faith alone, not by observing the law. He was not backing down, either. A nasty argument, hard feelings, and deep schisms (a church split.) **could** have resulted from this meeting.

But the split **didn't** happen. Instead of conflict we see God's grace working in both people. James and Paul both “major on the majors” and “minor on the minors.” They choose to agree on the essentials:

- salvation is by grace, through faith, in Christ, and
- Christians are called to obey God's moral and ethical standards (it's not a matter “anything goes”).

Paul and James have the grace to let other things go: if Jewish Christians want to follow the Jewish law, great. But, by God's grace, non-Jewish Christians are not bound by such laws. However, Paul is gracious to accept explicit clarification on issues that could easily lead into sin: temptations to idol worship and sexual immorality. Paul has no problem agreeing on these things. We are **ALL** called to obedience and holy living.

In our relationships with other Christians we can learn from Paul and James:

- **be gracious to one another:** Despite their differences, Paul had collected an offering for the desperately poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem – wonderful. James responds to Paul with praise to God.
- **choose to love and respect one another:** Paul and James choose to work through their disagreement with respect and integrity, through open-minded discussion and dialogue;
- **focus on God's Kingdom and His work:** James and Paul emphasize the essential truths of the faith, not “non-salvation” issues, personal interpretations, or cultural traditions.

Note what Paul and James did **NOT** do. They did not fight or walk away. We should **NOT**: fight, split, walk away, send nasty emails, talk behind people's backs, gossip, or sulk.

What can you learn from Paul and James? Celebrate the (few) really important things: salvation in Jesus through faith and a desire to love God and love our neighbour. Let other things go. Pray for your relationships with others. Pray especially about those with whom you disagree. And pray we may handle our decision-making with grace and a constant focus on God's Kingdom work among us.

*With great devotion
we pray that we may be servants of Jesus in all we do.
May we console others, with Christ the consoler.
May we share God's love, with Christ the redeemer,
May we bring hope, with Christ the healer,
the liberator,
the enricher,
the strengthener.
Through you, may we, your church, help many;
to console, liberate and give them courage;
to bring them light not only for their spirit
but also for their bodies;
and bring, as well, other helps to the soul and body
of each and every one of our neighbours.
I ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Pierre Favre (1506-1546)

Wednesday, June 21: Acts 21:27-36

In contrast with James' and the Jewish Christians' gracious welcome of Paul, the Jewish *non-Christians* go ballistic when Paul arrives in Jerusalem. Paul does purify himself according to all the Jewish laws. He is as ceremonially "clean" as any of his Jewish peers (21:26) yet they still accuse him of defiling the temple.

Paul is accused of 2 things:

- Teaching "*everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place.*" This isn't true at all. But accepting the truth Paul taught would require the Jews to accept Jesus as fulfillment of the promises to the people, the law, and the temple ... something they are not prepared to do.
- Bringing Greeks into the temple and defiling the holy place. This was a bold-faced lie (21:29). Jesus, of course, faced lots of untrue accusations as well.

So it begins ... The arrest and suffering Paul knew would take place had started ... How do you think Paul felt? How would he have "*practiced his faith*" this day? Would he have prayed? What would he have prayed? Would he have brought to mind some of God's promises? Which ones? Would he have doubted God's purpose and plan? (Remember how Paul responded in a similar circumstance: Acts 16:19-25)

Have you ever been falsely accused? When difficulties come your way, how do you respond? How can you pray in difficult times? Could you focus your mind on some of God's promises? Which ones?

How can you know God's peace and presence when times are very bad? How can you "*pray and sing hymns to God*" (Acts 16:25) in the midst of pain? Pray for God's Spirit to empower you to know His comfort and presence even when times are very hard.

Maybe you need to memorize some of God's promises of presence and peace? (Matthew 28:18-20, Philippians 4:13 & 19, Romans 8:28-39, others ... if you need help, speak with a pastor)

*Father, we gather in your presence in prayer and praise.
We thank you for our health and happiness,
for forgiveness and healing,
for our talents,
and for our friends.
We thank you for the wonderful world you have given us
to explore and to use to your greater glory.
We thank you for the gift of Jesus Christ, your Son,
who died that we might have life and live it to the full.
Send your Spirit to accompany us on our daily journey.
Give us wisdom that we may find you in all things.
Give us understanding that we may learn from your Word and your world.
Give us compassion that we may show your face to those we meet.
Give us generosity that we may share the gifts you have given us.
Give us faith that we may have confidence in ourselves.
Above all give us love that we may bring joy into the lives of those around us.
We ask this through Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

Thursday, June 22: Acts 21:37-22:29

Alexander Hamilton (1755 or 1757–1804), subject of the hit musical, *Hamilton*, was an American statesman and one of the Founding Fathers of the United States. He said, "*I think the first duty of society is justice.*" Justice – right, dependable, honest, good, equitable, impartial action – is critical to a fair and stable society. The Romans

had developed one of the first comprehensive justice systems, foundational to our own, today (the Roman philosopher, Cicero, wrote, *"For there is but one essential justice which cements society, and one law which establishes this justice. This law is right reason, which is the true rule of all commandments and prohibitions. Whoever neglects this law, whether written or unwritten, is necessarily unjust and wicked"* – 'nuff said).

Paul's first defence is before the Roman commander, Claudius Lysias. Claudius Lysias is a remarkably open-minded man who is prepared to give Paul an honest hearing. The Jewish mob, on the other hand, just want Paul dead and will lie and cheat to see him dead. Claudius Lysias doesn't hand Paul over for flogging and lynching to please the mob the way Pontius Pilate had with Jesus. Lysias is genuinely concerned that justice is done. Paul:

- Speaks of his Jewish birth, upbringing, and education;
- Emphasizes his zeal for God and previous persecution of Christians;
- Describes his conversion – all God's doing, not Paul's own choice;
- Mentions Ananias – a well-respected Jew (and Christian) – who restored his sight;
- Presents his vision of the Lord in the temple – again, God's doing, not his own idea.

Paul does NOT argue theology. He does share his story. How can anyone argue with that? No one could. No one could question his conversion. However, the ultra-Jewish Jews could not believe their God would give him this second vision. Paul's comment that God was sending him to the Gentiles (non-Jews) incited a riot. How could the God of Israel care about Gentiles? The Jews were God's chosen people, His ONLY people. Gentiles were "dogs." God could not possibly love non-Jews? No. (I wonder how Claudius Lysias, a Gentile, felt at this point??. Maybe this experience of ugly bigotry and ethnic exceptionalism helps explain his sympathy for and protection of Paul. Do we think God loves us more than others? Are there people we don't think God loves?).

When we are asked about our faith, the best thing we can do is simply share our story. What has God done in your life? How do you know He is real? What is your experience of God? How have you seen God at work in your life or in the lives of people around you? It is very difficult for anyone to argue with that. Recently I was stopped by a pair of missionaries from another faith: they wanted to argue theology with me. I chose to respond by simply telling my story of faith in Jesus. Then I asked them to tell me their stories. It was a relatively short, one-sided discussion, because they didn't have any personal stories to share. And they couldn't argue the experiences of God I genuinely had experienced in my life.

Remember God loves each person who crosses your path, today. He doesn't only love people just like you. He loves the "other" people, just as much ...

Pray that God would be very real to you all through this day. And, when the opportunity comes, don't be afraid to tell your story. Pray for others, too – in the church, community, your family – that they would know God's personal presence and be bold in telling their story when the opportunity arises. Pray for those "other" people, that you would see them as God's precious children, as well ...

*Lord, as we go to our work this day,
help us notice your presence within it.
May we take pleasure in your presence with us.
Show us clearly what our duty is,
and help us to be faithful in doing it.
May all we do be well done, working as if we were serving you.
Give us enthusiasm to attempt and patience to perform.
When we cannot love our work,
may we think of it as your task,
and make what is unlovely beautiful through loving service,
for thy name's sake.
Amen*

George Dawson (1821-1876)

Friday, June 23: Acts 22:30-23:11

The second trial Paul faced was before the Jewish Sanhedrin. People have made all sorts of interesting comments on Paul's harsh words for the high priest. The priest's anger seems to be directed at Paul's assertion that he has been a faithful Jew right through to this day (v.1); the priest, knowing Paul's Christian conviction, considers this blasphemy. Paul, given his poor eyesight (Galatians 4:13-16, 6:11), may not have recognized the high priest, or may just have been "playing dumb" to make a sharp point.

Paul's instigation of a controversy between the Pharisees (who believed in the resurrection of the dead) and the Sadducees (who did not) may have simply been a smokescreen to cause confusion and dissension in the Jewish ranks. Or (more likely) Paul did want to have this debate. Resurrection is an essential concept in Christianity (if Jesus has not been raised, our faith is useless [1 Corinthians 15:12-34]).

Paul is trying to help the Pharisees understand that Jesus is the Messiah, the fulfillment of all their Jewish hopes and dreams. If Jesus did rise from the dead, the Pharisees' beliefs have been proven true. He is inviting them to consider the evidence. To some extent Paul's argument seems to work: the Pharisees begin to defend Paul.

But ultimately the Romans must intervene again. Then, in God's grace, the Lord appears to Paul that night with a wonderful word of encouragement (Acts 23:11).

Paul valiantly tries to share the good news with the Jewish leaders. Surely God could have miraculously intervened and given them a vision as dramatic as Paul's when he was actively persecuting Christians (Acts 9). Wouldn't that be perfect? – the Jewish leaders converted to faith in Jesus? But God does not intervene; no handkerchiefs made people well (Acts 19:11-12), no resurrected Eutychus (Acts 20:7-12), no conversions. Why does God do a miracle one time in one place and not another? We don't know.

Even when God lets the events of life overwhelm us, even when things don't go as we would want them to, Jesus is beside us saying, "*Take courage.*" Repeatedly in Scripture, God says, "*Do not be afraid ...*" May you hear His word of encouragement today.

Do you know someone going through a very tough time? Come alongside them. Encourage them with the truth of God's presence – take courage. Use this familiar writing as the basis for your prayer, today:

*One night a man had a dream.
He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the LORD.
Across the sky flashed scenes from his life.
For each scene he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand:
one belonging to him, and the other to the LORD.
When the last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand.
He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints.
He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in his life.
This really bothered him and he questioned the LORD about it:
"LORD, you said that once I decided to follow you, you'd walk with me all the way.
But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life,
there is only one set of footprints.
I don't understand why when I needed you most you would leave me."
The LORD replied:
"My son, my precious child, I love you and I would never leave you.
During your times of trial and suffering,
when you see only one set of footprints,
it was then that I carried you."
Amen*

attributed to Mary Stevenson (1922-1999)

Saturday, June 24: Acts 23:12-22

Be careful what you promise ... I wonder if the 40 men who made an oath not to eat or drink till they killed Paul died of thirst or starvation? If you read on, you know that the plot to kill Paul fails. Isn't it interesting these men are so concerned about God's honour they are prepared to lie and murder (breaking two of the Ten Commandments) out of "devotion" to God. Does the end justify the means??. Not for God ...

God does not need us to defend His honour. He has proven time and again that His Word will stand without our zealous attempts to defend it. His church will stand despite us. Certainly, we are never asked to use dishonourable means (like murder) to defend Him. When I see some Christians so concerned about what they believe is "true" they viciously attack other believers verbally or in print, it's so sad. Some Christians are downright cruel to other believers, out of "devotion" to God. This is evil. And God can defend Himself quite well.

We are called, of course, to be aware of false teachers ('wolves') – people who teach inaccurately about God, ethics, values, etc. But the best way to protect ourselves – and others – is to make sure we know and teach God's truth. When we know God's Word we will not be led astray. The challenge is, Scripture does not speak definitively on every issue. So sometimes we must do what we think is best, recognizing that others may come to different conclusions. Can we live with that ambiguity?

If you are unsure about some doctrinal issue, moral position, or point of view, search the Scriptures. If you need help, ask a Christian friend or one of the church staff. Knowing God's truth, where it clearly exists, will help you make right choices. Note it is **God's** truth and **God's** Word we teach ... We can construct lots of other "truths" based on cultural things and personal opinions that are not actually clearly taught in Scripture. We can try to be loud and clear where Scripture is actually silent and dark. We always need to be careful to discern what **God's** truth and wisdom really are, and what **our** biases, interpretations, preferences, and opinions are.

Pray that God would help you to continue to learn His truth more and more:

- helping you know Jesus more completely and fully;
- helping you be filled with His Spirit as you allow the Spirit to take control of every part of your life (what parts of your life are you holding back from God's control?);
- helping you make right moral choices (are there things in your life you need to confess and repent about? Just do it.);
- helping you read and understand His Word;
- helping you share His truth honestly and humbly with those around you.

*My soul glorifies the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.
For he has blessed me lavishly
and makes me ready to respond.
He shatters my little world
and lets me be poor before him.
He takes from me all my plans
and gives me more than I can hope for or ask.
He gives me opportunities and the ability to become free
and to burst through my boundaries.
He gives the strength to be doing, to build on him alone,
for he shows himself as the ever greater One in my life.
He has made known to me this:
It is in my being servant that it becomes possible.
For God's kingdom to break through
here and now. Amen*

Translated from German by Olga Warnke

Sunday, June 25: Acts 23:23-35 (One service today, 10:00 – picnic to follow at)

Martin Luther King Jr. said, *"There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but he must take it because conscience tells him it is right."* In a more folksy way, Mark Twain says, *"Always do right. This will gratify some people and astonish the rest."*

Claudius Lysias does what is right, even when most people are angry with him. Lysias is a brave, upstanding politician. What a great role model for politicians today. What a great role model for all of us today. It takes a lot of courage to do what is right when the majority opinion is against you.

In Claudius Lysias' case he is risking a violent rebellion that could cost him his command or a severe reprimand from his superior, Governor Felix (who probably felt, *"Just give the people what they want and keep the peace."*). He is at least risking losing a promotion if not earning a demotion.

Pray that God would give each of us the courage to do what is right, even when it's not a popular option. Lord, give us the integrity to follow your truth even when there is personal risk (and, perhaps, personal cost).

*Almighty, eternal, just, and merciful God,
grant us the grace to do for You alone what we know You want us to do,
and always to desire what pleases You.
Thus, inwardly cleansed, interiorly enlightened,
and inflamed by the fire of the Holy Spirit,
may we be able to follow in the footprints of Your beloved Son,
our Lord Jesus Christ.
And, by Your grace alone, may we make our way to You, Most High,
Who live and rule in perfect Trinity and simple Unity,
and are glorified God all-powerful forever and ever.
Amen.*

Monday, June 26: Acts 24:1-21

Paul's third trial is before Felix, Roman Procurator of Judea from 52-58 AD. Tertullus, prosecuting lawyer from the Jewish establishment, begins with rather brazen flattery (24:2-3). Other ancient writers (Josephus, Tacitus) describe Felix as a dreadful governor; he is cruel, unjust, indecisive, and incompetent. Tertullus accuses Paul of inciting political unrest, disloyalty to Rome, and, of course, religious heresy.

Paul replies that he is not a troublemaker or revolutionary; he is a true follower of God. Paul argues that "the Way" (Christianity) is the logical fulfillment of all the Jewish hopes and dreams (at least the Pharisees' hopes and dreams; they believed in resurrection: *'It is concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today.'* [Acts 24:21]). Jesus' resurrection is central to Christian faith and the fulfillment of the Pharisees' hopes.

In our era, Judaism and Christianity are considered separate religions. But in Paul's day, most believers considered themselves Jews who had discovered the fulfillment of all the prophecies of the Jewish Messiah in Jesus. They didn't see themselves starting a new religion, but living the fulfillment of Judaism. Paul is emphasizing unity among those who love God and invites Jews to discover their Messiah in Jesus.

Unity. Today there are many different Christian denominations. Some love to emphasize their uniqueness and distinctiveness (only they have the "truth" [as they define it]) by denigrating other churches.

But it is good to celebrate what binds us together in unity. It is great to emphasize the common essentials of our faith that unite Christians in the universal church of Jesus Christ, the Kingdom of God, that transcends geography, time, and denominations. What does Paul list as the essentials?

- Faith in God (v.14)
- Confidence in God's Word (v.14)
- Belief in the resurrection (including the resurrection and, thus, the divinity, of Jesus) (v. 15)
- Obedience to God's moral and ethical commands and will (v.16)

Pray for the "larger church": other Christian churches in our city and around the world. We are part of a wonderful fellowship of Downtown Churches in Lethbridge. Pray for the church closest to where you live (whatever it's denomination).

*Father in heaven,
you have given us a mind to know you,
a will to serve you,
and a heart to love you.
Be with us today in all that we do,
so that your light may shine out in our lives.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

Thomas More (1478-1535)

Tuesday, June 27: Acts 24:22-27

Unlike Claudius Lysias, Felix is not concerned about doing what is right and just. Nor is he decisive. He will not make a decision at all. Instead he delays (hoping for a bribe, perhaps?). He keeps Paul under house arrest for two years. He does speak with him more: "*he (Paul) spoke about faith in Christ Jesus ... righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come ...*" (Acts 24:24-25). But Felix cannot or will not make a decision about Paul – or about his personal faith in Jesus.

Felix is willing to listen, and listen, and listen ... but never actually puts his life into Jesus' hands. He cannot make decisions. He will not step out in faith. What a pity.

Poor Felix. I get the sense, from his desire to hear more from Paul, that he wants to believe. But he is afraid (Acts 24:25). Afraid of what? What ought Felix ought to have done? What would have been the result?

Why are people afraid to put their faith in Jesus, today? Why are you afraid to let Jesus take control of certain areas of your life? What ought you to do? What will be the result?

*Lord, may nothing separate me from You today.
Teach me how to choose only Your way today so each step will lead me closer to You.
Help me walk by your Word and not my feelings.
Help me to keep my heart pure and undivided.
Protect me from my own careless thoughts, words, and actions.
And keep me from being distracted by MY wants, MY desires,
MY thoughts on how things should be.
Help me to embrace what comes my way as an opportunity ...
rather than a personal inconvenience.
And finally, help me to rest in the truth of Psalm 86:13, 'Great is your love toward me.'
You already see the ways I will fall short and mess up.
But right now, I consciously tuck Your whisper of absolute love for me into the deepest part of my heart.
I recognize Your love for me is not based on my performance.
You love me warts and all.
That's amazing.
But what's most amazing is that the Savior of the world would desire a few minutes with me this day.
Lord, help me to forever remember what a gift it is to sit with You like this.
Amen.*

Lysa Terkeurst

Wednesday, June 28: Acts 25:1-12

Procius Festus, who succeeds Felix as Procurator of Judea, is a man of action. Josephus, a first century Jewish writer, describes Festus as a noble leader who restored law and order after Felix's corrupt, inept, indecisive governorship. Within three days of taking office Festus is taking charge of Paul's case. Festus quickly sees through the Jewish leaders' plot to kill Paul on the trip to Jerusalem. Committed to justice, Festus ensures there will be a trial in Caesarea, the Roman "capital," where Paul is imprisoned.

Again, the Jewish leaders *"brought many serious charges against him, but they could not prove them."* Paul is aware of the Jewish plot, too. He appeals, as every Roman citizen has the right to do, to Caesar himself for justice. And Festus, bound by due process, honours Paul's request. May we NEVER short-change justice. Procius Festus, a non-believer, models justice at its best. May we be people who insist on justice, too.

As God's people, may we never bear false testimony against anyone, never make a charge we cannot prove, and never pass on hearsay. If we do hear rumours or gossip, may we ensure due process. If we hear something unflattering about someone, NEVER pass it on. If you are concerned about an individual's situation, go to them and ascertain the whole truth: if there is a genuine issue, commit to praying with and for that person. Don't spread it. **NEVER, EVER, pass on gossip.** *Lord, help us to be people of integrity who build others up and who NEVER tear others down.*

*Most holy God, give each of us a pure heart
and a way of living and speaking that shines out the faith we profess;
give us right purpose,
powers of reasoning unhindered by passions,
conduct that suits those who love You,
knowledge of Your commandments,
and wisdom to apply them to our lives.
May we enjoy health in body and in spirit.
Grant us a life of peace,
genuine faith and living hope,
sincere charity and bountiful generosity,
patience that knows no bounds
and the light of Your truth to proclaim Your goodness to us,
that forever and in all things placing our trust only in You,
we may abound in every good work.
For to You belong all glory, honor and majesty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
now and ever and unto ages of ages.
Amen.*

Thursday, June 29: Acts 25:13-22

King Agrippa II, the Roman appointed "king" of Galilee, arrives in Caesarea to pay his respects to Festus, the new Roman governor (Agrippa II had little political power, but by symbolically representing the faded glory of kings like David and Solomon, his presence appeased the Jewish authorities. He also had responsibility to care for the Temple and appoint the High Priest). By birth, he was a "Herod" (just as Queen Elizabeth II is a "Windsor"):

- Herod the Great (reigned 37-4 BC), Agrippa II's great grandfather, was king when Jesus was born (he was the one who massacred the children in Bethlehem [Matthew 2])
- Herod Antipas (reigned 4 BC - 39 AD), Agrippa II's great uncle, was king during Jesus' adulthood (he had John the Baptist beheaded and questioned Jesus before His crucifixion [Luke 23:6-13]).
- Agrippa I (reigned 39-44 AD), Agrippa II's father, executed James the son of Zebedee (John's brother, NOT James, Jesus' brother, who was the head of the church in Jerusalem, whom Paul just met),

imprisoned Peter, and subsequently dies a horrible death (Acts 12:1-23).

Agrippa II knew all about "the Way" – Christians – from his family experiences with them. His father's nasty death is described as divine punishment for not giving praise to God and persecuting Jesus' followers (Acts 12:23). I wonder what was going on in his mind as he meets Paul, clearly one of the leaders of "the Way"?

Agrippa II comes from a line of bitter persecutors of those who followed Jesus. Can God actually soften the heart of a Herod? What do you think? Do you know people who have been staunch critics of your faith? Who are dogmatically anti-Christian? Can God actually change their hearts?

Yes, He can. My experience is that some of those who present themselves as the greatest skeptics are also those in whom God is doing the greatest work. Their intense reaction against Jesus is evidence the person is fighting the Holy Spirit's conviction tooth and nail. Pray for those you know who give you the hardest time ... who seem furthest from faith ... the Holy Spirit does still do miracles.

Pray for people you know who actively oppose Jesus. Pray for those who more passively just ignore Jesus. Pray that His Spirit would open hearts to see Jesus for who He is ...

*O Lord, grant that we may meet this day in peace.
Help us in all things to rely upon Your holy will.
In each hour of the day, reveal Your will to us.
Bless our dealings with all who surround us.
Teach us to treat all that shall come to us throughout the day with peace of soul,
and with the firm conviction that Your will governs all.
In all our deeds and words, guide our thoughts and feelings.
In unforeseen events, let us not forget that all are sent by You.
Teach us to act firmly and wisely, without embittering and embarrassing others.
Give us the strength to bear the fatigue of the coming day, with all that it shall bring.
Direct our wills.
Teach us to pray.
Pray within us.
Amen.*

Friday, June 30: Saturday, June 23: Acts 25:23-Acts 26:32

Paul's 4th trial was before Festus (Acts 25:1-12); his 5th trial is before Festus, Agrippa II, his sister Bernice, and other political and social leaders. Paul tells his story, again. Festus, as a Roman ignorant of Jewish faith and beliefs, thinks Paul is insane (26:24). But Agrippa II is not so sure – in fact I get the sense that he, like Felix, is close to faith: *"Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"* (26:28)

Paul's response is wonderful: *"Short time or long – I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am (a Christian.), except for these chains."* Agrippa II is so sympathetic to Paul and his message he would love to see Paul released.

Yes, God can soften the hearts of even the most determined opponents of faith. The stories of Josh MacDowell – a lawyer who sought to disprove Christianity and came to faith (author of *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* and other books that argue, convincingly, for Jesus), Lee Strobel – a hard-nosed investigative reporter who had the same ambition and same result, faith in Christ (author of *The Case for Faith, The Case for Christ, The Case for the Creator*, and more), C.S. Lewis – a skeptical professor whose academic research convinced him of Christian truth (author of *Mere Christianity, Miracles, The Problem of Pain, The Chronicles of Narnia*, etc.) – prove that people who sincerely seek truth often come to faith (other helpful writers today are Francis Chan, Donald Miller, and Tom Wright, but they don't come from a skeptical background).

Encourage those you know, who do not believe, to risk considering the evidence. The books listed above are good resources ... pray that the one you care about would be open to considering the possibilities ...

Do you have doubts, questions, concerns? Don't hesitate to look for answers. There ARE answers. The books above are good places to start. Don't be afraid to ask the staff or a Christian friend, too. Every question is a good question.

Pray that God would help you grow stronger in your faith.

*Most holy God, give each of us a pure heart
and a way of living and speaking that shines out the faith we profess;
give us right purpose,
powers of reasoning unhindered by passions,
conduct that suits those who love You,
knowledge of Your commandments,
and wisdom to apply them to our lives.
May we enjoy health in body and in spirit.
Grant us a life of peace,
genuine faith and living hope,
sincere charity and bountiful generosity,
patience that knows no bounds
and the light of Your truth to proclaim Your goodness to us,
that forever and in all things placing our trust only in You,
we may abound in every good work.
For to You belong all glory, honor and majesty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
now and ever and unto ages of ages.
Amen.*

Saturday, July 1 (Canada Day): Psalm 72 and 1 Timothy 2:1-4

It's Canada Day. What we know as Canada came into being 150 years ago (although it's good to remember there were many nations in this land long before 1867). Canada's official motto (on the coat of arms) is "*A Mari usque ad Mare*," which is Latin for "*From Sea to Sea*." The phrase comes from Psalm 72:8, which in King James' translation reads: "*He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, and from the river unto the ends of the earth.*" Interestingly, when the verse was chosen it was an aspirational statement. In 1867, the Dominion of Canada was only Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. The only "sea" was the Atlantic Ocean. "*From Sea to Sea*" did not apply to Canada until British Columbia joined Confederation in 1871.

We assume "*He shall have dominion ...*" refers to God. But read the psalm. In context, it is a prayer for the king. It's a prayer for Solomon and his successors – for government leaders. Of course, they fall far short of this ideal. The psalm can also be read as a prophecy of Jesus' coming and His establishment of the perfect Kingdom of God.

This psalm is a reminder that it is good for us to pray for our political leaders:

- Our Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau
- Our Member of Parliament, Rachael Harder
- Our Premier, Rachel Notley
- Our Members of the Legislative Assembly, Shannon Phillips and Maria Fitzpatrick
- Our Mayor, Chris Spearman
- Our City Council, Liz Iwaskiw, Joe Mauro, Bridget Mearns, Rob Miyashiro, Jeffrey Coffman, Jeff Carlson, Blaine Hyggen, Ryan Parker

Whether we agree politically with these people or not is irrelevant, we are called to pray for those in government: they need God's wisdom and His strength (consider Jeremiah 29:7 [written to those in exile in Babylon], 1 Timothy 2:1-4 [written when Nero was emperor]).

We also celebrate Jesus is the One who does have dominion from sea to sea to sea (including the Arctic Ocean.).

Thank God and pray for our country. Thank God and pray for our province. Thank God and pray for our city ...

*Father God,
As we raise high and wave our flag with pride today,
fill us with gratitude for the freedoms we enjoy.
And fill us with compassion for those who do not know what it is to live and speak and worship freely.
As we meet with family and friends around a heavily-laden table,
may our grace include a moment of silent reflection
for those who don't know how they or their children will eat today.
May we show them respect, not only by exhibiting restraint,
but by resolving to take one step, however small, to alleviate their suffering.
As we raise our glasses in salute to a dominion that has,
as its foundation, a deep and abiding trust in you,
give us an appreciation for the almost unparalleled access to health care and clean water that we enjoy.
Remind us that one person,
obeying your command to give water to the thirsty and food to the hungry,
can change the world.
As we stand and gaze up at the heavens,
in awe of the breathtaking display as fireworks streak and blaze across the night sky,
may we be overwhelmed by the beauty of creation.
And may we be sobered by the realization that we all have a responsibility
to do what we can to take care of and save it.
And above all, as we celebrate this great country today,
may we be grateful for all the blessings we have received.
And, even more, may we give thanks to you,
the one who has blessed us so that we, in turn, might be a blessing to others.
God, keep our land glorious and free.
Amen.*

Sara Davison

Sunday, July 2: Acts 27:1-12

Luke accompanies Paul on this voyage to Rome ("we" in 27:1). Luke, writing the Book of Acts, gives us an amazingly detailed, first hand account of a first century boat trip. What a voyage. The journey was begun in good weather, but the necessity of changing ships and headwinds held them back.

After "the Fast"/Day of Atonement/Yom Kippur (October 5 in 59 AD) sailing was becoming more and more perilous. Back then, all sailing on the Mediterranean normally ended by the end of October due to violent and unpredictable winter weather. Reaching Rome was likely impossible that Fall: Paul (who had sailed a lot in recent years) advocated staying put, but the centurion, pilot and boat owner wanted to go further. In our modern age, we forget how "if-y" travel used to be (although for refugees today it is still perilous).

I appreciate the centurion, Julius (Luke even gives us his name, which is very rare; centurions were not that important. I get the impression Luke likes him, too.). In Sidon, he lets Paul stay with his friends.

As we have seen through this month, friends – Christian friends, the church – are an important support. Paul is always getting together with friends, mentioning friends in his letters ... Don't cut yourself off from Christian friends and family, in church or other places.

Christian friends are incredible sources of wisdom, inspiration, and encouragement. Do you feel “un-friended”? Ask God to bring a Christian friend or two into your life. Maybe someone is just waiting for you??. Ask the staff about a small group you can connect with.

*Lord our God, teach us, we pray,
to ask you in the right way for the right blessings.
Please steer the ship of our lives towards yourself,
the tranquil haven of all storm-tossed souls.
Show us the course in which we should go.
Renew a willing spirit within us.
Let your Spirit curb our wayward senses,
and guide and enable us toward that which is our true good:
to keep your laws,
and in all we do to rejoice always
in your glorious and gladdening presence.
For yours is the glory and praise from all your saints, forever and ever.
Amen.*

Basil of Caesarea (330-379)

Monday, July 3: Acts 27:13-44

In 2016, over 5000 refugees died trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea to escape war (1 in 88). Smugglers use poor quality, overcrowded ships to try to get people, desperate for a new life, across the sea.

Back in Paul’s day, 276 people were on the boat (27:36). Quite a load for a small ship. When the storm hit, panic that ensued. Luke gives a detailed first-hand description of events. In the days before life jackets, coast guards, electronic communications, SOS calls, and other safety measures, this was a life and death struggle.

Our challenges may not be crossing the Mediterranean Sea, then or now. But we all have storms in our lives, and, like Luke, Paul and the other 274 people on this tiny boat, we don’t know what the future holds.

Paul doesn’t know what will happen, but he tells everyone, “*Don’t be afraid*” (vs.22-26). He has confidence that God will accomplish His will, regardless of the weather. Know what? Nothing can stop God’s plan for our lives. We may not understand what He is doing, but we can be sure He will be glorified through it.

- “*Don’t run for it.*” (vs.30-32). When we’re in trouble, it’s tempting to run. The temptation to panic and find our own solution is natural; to wait for God is very difficult. But when we do trust in God rather than our own street smarts, we end up making better choices with better results.
- “*Don’t go hungry.*” (v.33-38). Paul doesn’t just say “trust in God” – he has a very practical side, too. If they’re going to make land, they need their strength. When you’re under stress, don’t neglect your health. Eat well. Exercise. Get your sleep. (those good things your doctor tells you ... do them.)

*God, my good and loving Lord,
I acknowledge all the sins which I have committed every day in my life,
whether in thought, word or deed.
I ask for forgiveness from the depths of my heart for offending You and others
and repent of my old ways.
I have also omitted to do what Your holy law requires of me.
Help me by Your grace to change,
to sin no more and to walk in the way of righteousness
and to praise and glorify Your Name,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.*

Tuesday, July 4: Acts 28:1-10

"Everyone reached land in safety" (27:44). Once ashore, God continues to protect Paul through the incident with a poisonous snake and the healing of Publius' father. Some people have taken the snake story to ridiculous extremes, believing it teaches us we should purposely handle poisonous snakes to prove our faith (ask Stephen Reynolds about some of the folks in Kentucky.). Jesus, of course, dismisses such fanciful attempts to force God's hand: "The Scriptures say, 'You must not test the LORD your God.'" (Matthew 4:7).

Paul is still a prisoner, under Julius' watchful eye. But throughout the journey, and here on Malta, Paul rises above his "poor-me-I'm-a-prisoner" status to look out for the welfare of everyone. His warning and advice likely saved all 276 on the boat (27:30-31, 33-38). He cares for the ill on Malta.

Even when we feel like our situation is desperate, we can still be a blessing to others. My friend Irene, who lived in a care home and suffered from Crohn's disease, arthritis and numerous other ailments, used to notice when one of the other residents went into hospital. As soon as the resident returned, she was the first person at her neighbour's door, with her walker, and a bowl of hot soup. "I can't do much," Irene would say, "but I can do something. There's always someone a little worse off than me." Oswald Chambers, in *My Utmost For His Highest*, writes: "God's grace produces men and women with a strong family likeness to Jesus Christ, not pampered, spoiled weaklings." That's worth reflecting on.

To whom can you be a blessing, today? We all have our own problems. But pray that God would help you see someone to whom you can be a blessing ... You will have a tremendous impact on the other person as you encourage them (however you do that). And it will also be blessing to your soul. It truly is more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). Pray and reflect on the truth of that statement ...

*You are great and wonderful, my Lord and my God.
And yet I am only a dull peasant
if I imagine I can even begin to understand and appreciate who you are.
I am ignorant of so much within myself –
how can I imagine I know you?
I am less than nothing compared to you. You are so great.
What you have done is so amazing.
Your works are so beyond comprehension.
What little I know of you is so incredible.
How great is your goodness, O Lord. Blessed are you forever.
May all created things praise you, God.
You love us so much you choose to welcome us into a relationship with you, yourself.
Here on earth it is as if we are in exile –
how incredible that you come to us.
However good we may be, we can never be good enough for you
And yet in your love, grace, and generosity you welcome us into your arms.
Your love is infinite.
You are so great and wonderful, my Lord and my God.
Amen*

Adapted from Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

Wednesday, July 5: Acts 28:11-31

Paul finally does get to Rome. He had hoped to travel to Rome on his own as a free man (Romans 1:11-13, 15:23-33); but his plans had not worked out. Now he arrives in Rome as a prisoner, many years after he had hoped. He has had five trials, a shipwreck, and a few other hurdles along the way. Life has not worked out exactly as he had planned. Amazingly, though, God accomplishes His plan, in His own time, in His own way ...

What do you think Paul learned during his unjust arrest? Five trials? Threats to his life? Two years of imprisonment in Caesarea? A wild sea journey? A shipwreck? A poisonous snake attack? Another sea voyage? House arrest in Rome?

When Paul shared the good news about the Kingdom of God and Jesus with the Jewish leaders in Rome, most of them rejected him. Did Paul give up? No. *"For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. He proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance."* (Acts 28:30-31). Paul persisted. He never gave up.

If Paul were to share his insights with you into who God is and how God works through life's circumstances, what do you think he would say?

How can Paul's experiences and words be an encouragement to you?

*God,
like Paul we can sometimes feel you have treated us harshly,
that life has dealt us an unfair deal.
We wonder how we will cope with bereavement and loss,
painful endings and uncertain futures,
wounds, inflicted by self or others,
burdens we bear and heavy loads we carry.
So how do we face the dark night of the soul
the harsh reality of another day,
the darkness of the sun going down on a relationship, a job, a life?
God,
your Son and servants in the past have been anxious too,
have lived with danger, doubt and darkness.
Their example reminds us that
courage does not mean an absence of fear,
rather the ability to live with it.
Help us, God,
to utilise the resources around us and within us
to get us through.
To lean on friends and family when we need to,
to accept help and company,
to tell how it is, to them, to you,
and to realise that to do this is not to fail.
For in our weakness you are our strength.
Amen*

Church of Scotland

Thursday, July 6: 1 Thessalonians 1

On June 11, we read about Paul's first visit to Thessalonica, in Macedonia. He and Silas had been dragged before the city council, accused of treason, forced to post bond, and run out of town to Berea (Acts 17:1-14). When they began sharing their faith in Berea, some Jews from Thessalonica went there to stir up trouble: that's a 75 km trudge (on foot, over rough, dangerous roads) just to abuse Paul and Silas! They really didn't like Paul.

However, within just a few years there is a thriving church in Thessalonica. Only the Holy Spirit could have made this possible (1:5). But notice that living for Jesus in this town meant "severe suffering" (1:6). Following Jesus is not always sweetness and light.

Significantly, Paul prays – regularly – for the people in Thessalonica. We may wonder what prayer accomplishes, especially when we pray the same thing for the same people or the same church (our church?) time after time.

It's a valid conversation to have. Surely once we bring a request or prayer to God once, we don't need to repeat it? God doesn't need to be reminded, does He?

No, of course God doesn't forget! This is one of those mysteries where we may reflect that prayer does more for the person praying than for God. When we discipline ourselves to pray regularly for someone or for our church, we focus our thoughts and minds on that person or ministry. It is good to pray and think of people/ministries you care about often. It is good to place them in God's hands. However sometimes I think of practical things I can do to encourage that person or to help the church as I pray. My prayer leads me to action!

What does Paul pray for his friends? *"We think of your faithful work, your loving deeds, and the enduring hope you have because of our Lord Jesus Christ."* This is a wonderful description of "church" at its best:

- Faithful work
- Loving deeds
- Sharing and living in our enduring hope in Jesus.

Pray that we might be such a church. And pray for those who may be suffering – with health problems, mental health issues, family crises, or suffering for their faith in other parts of the world ...

*When the storms of life are raging,
God, I ask, 'Where will I find justice and truth?'
When every conversation is loaded with anxiety and tension,
when all my beliefs are thrown into question,
and my bearings are lost in battering winds of change,
God, I ask, 'Who has integrity?
Who can understand?
Whom can I trust?'
When the everyday walk of life is a push against the grain,
when no one is clear,
when no one says what they mean and situations get cloudy,
when I am tired of trying, battle-weary and bruised by life's blows,
God, I ask, 'Where can I shelter from the wind?
Where can I hide from the storm?'
When I hear nothing but the sound of the storm –
not even my own voice,
God, will you please hear:
my weak whisper in the wind,
my plea for peace,
my prayer for calm.
Stand by me while I draw strength,
shelter me that I may know how to stand up again.
Amen*

Church of Scotland

Friday, July 7: 1 Thessalonians 3

I appreciate people who are honest. I appreciate people in business who are honest. I appreciate people in politics who are honest. I appreciate people who are Christian who are honest. Honest Christians are realistic that trying to follow Jesus is not always easy, pleasant, fun, or exciting. Sometimes it's just hard. There are challenges from other people. We have our own doubts. Life just hurts. We wonder if it's all worth it ...

The Christians in Thessalonica wrestled with these difficulties. In 1 Thessalonians 2, Paul lists some of the suffering they endured at the hands of their own countrymen ([read it if you want](#)). During all this persecution, they remained strong in their faith in Jesus (3:7-8).

Paul continues to pray for them (3:9-13). What does he pray?

- He thanks God for them; they inspire him (3:9). Who can I thank God for, today? Who inspires me?
- He asks God to teach them and help them grow in faith (3:10). Who can I pray that for?
- He prays their love for one another and for all people grows and overflows (3:12). How can our love for one another (in the church) grow and overflow? How can our love for "all people" grow and overflow? (Who are those "other" people we find hard to love?_
- He prays their hearts would be strong, blameless, and holy. Who can you pray for, that their heart would be strong, blameless, and holy?

*We shall pray to the God, Creator of all things,
to Jesus Christ, our Saviour,
and to the Spirit, our Comforter,
who have called us from darkness into light.*

*You opened our eyes so that we can recognise you,
most high among the highest, holy and surrounded by holiness.
You made visible the everlasting structure of the Universe and set the Earth on its foundations.
For all generations, you have been faithful and just in your judgements,
and wonderful in your power and majesty.
Wisely you have created, and wisely you have kept things in being.
All that we see shows your goodness.
To all who trust in you, you are faithful, kind, and merciful.
You give help to those in peril and rescue to those without hope.
You create all that has breath and watch over it;
You invite all people to love you through Jesus Christ your beloved Son,
through whom you give us wisdom, holiness, and honour.*

*Please, Lord, be our help and our support.
Free us from our troubles.
Take pity on the lowly.
Raise up those who have fallen.*

*Give help to the poor, health to the sick, and bring home those who have wandered away.
Feed the hungry, ransom captives, give strength to the weak, and courage to the faint-hearted.
Let all people come to know that you alone are God, that Jesus Christ is Your son,
and that we are your people and the sheep of your flock.*

*Forgive us our wickednesses and injustices, our sins and our transgressions.
Do not weigh us down with the burden of our sins,
but purify us and direct the paths we take so that we go forward in purity and innocence of heart,
so that all that we do is good and acceptable to you and to those who lead us.
Lord, let your face shine upon us so that we may peacefully enjoy all good things.
May your powerful hand be a roof over our heads
and may your strength preserve us from all wrongdoing.*

*Free us, Lord, from those who hate us without cause.
Give peace and harmony to us and to all the inhabitants of the Earth,
as you have for all who call on you with trust and faith.
You alone can give us these gifts and confer these favours on us.
We put our trust in you through Jesus Christ,
our high priest, the guardian of our souls.
Through him be glory and majesty to you now
and through all generations until the end of time.*

Amen

Clement of Rome (died 99 AD)

Saturday, July 8: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-27

Following Jesus in Thessalonica was hard. In 1 Thessalonians 4:1 through 5:15, Paul talks more about enduring suffering. He talks about living good, holy, ethical lives. And he talks about the encouragement that one day, some day, Jesus will return and put all things right (you're welcome to read [these verses](#), too). At the conclusion of his letter, Paul makes these comments:

- *Always be joyful.* Even when life is tough, we can find joy in our relationship with Jesus.
- *Never stop praying.* Praying keeps us connected with God. We can be encouraged by His Spirit. And we can be changed through our prayers. Make talking with God as natural as taking every breath every day.
- *Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.* It is good to thank God and appreciate how He does provide for us.
- *Do not stifle the Holy Spirit.* Listen to God. And be open to what His Spirit is saying.
- *Do not scoff at prophecies, but test everything that is said. Hold on to what is good.* Be discerning. But also be willing to learn, grow, and change ... Don't be hard-hearted (or hard-minded).
- *Stay away from every kind of evil.* Be wise. Recognize temptation. And don't go there. Ever.

Paul prays for the people in Thessalonica (and for us): *"Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again."*

Pray this prayer for someone you love: *"Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again."*

Pray this prayer for our church: *"Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again."*

"God will make this happen, for he who calls you is faithful" (1 Thessalonians 5:24).

*I find it difficult to accept dead-ends.
I have grown to believe that with faith
I can get through any situation,
that every path will lead me somewhere.
And so when I come up against a wall and can move no further,
I waste time searching for an opening.
Then I try to climb over,
and when all else fails I stand and hammer it with childish fists
in case it will come tumbling down like the walls of Jericho.
I cannot bear to hit the wall in my relationships or in my work.
I feel a failure.
Teach me Lord,
when I find myself in a cul-de-sac, to reflect on how I got there.
Occasionally relationships are best severed
for the creative good of both parties. So hard.
Sometimes you call us away from one kind of work to another.
Some things are meant to be stopped.
Any path forged out of vengeance, deceit or betrayal,
or littered with greed and sinful self-indulgence is bound to lead to a dead-end.
And having reflected as Jonah did,
I will turn to You, God,
and pray that You will deliver me from the belly of the fish
to once again journey towards life.
Amen.*

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Sunday, July 9: James 5:13-18

Is prayer really something we ought to do? Throughout Scripture the resounding answer is "YES!!!" Prayer is one key way we get to know God, talk with God, listen to God, and learn from God.

James begins his letter commenting, *"If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do"* (James 1:5-8).

Throughout his letter, James emphasizes that if we have any needs, we should bring them to God. In Chapter 5 (today's reading), James lists all sorts of things we can pray about.

Sometimes God does miraculously provide just what we need. Miracles are nice because they don't require us to do anything. And our problems are fixed for us with no effort.

I find miracles are very rare occurrences, however. More often, God gives us the inspiration and motivation to help ourselves and solve problems with some effort, time, determination, and endurance.

We don't always need a "miracle." Many times, we just need the wisdom and the drive to roll up our sleeves and deal with our issues ourselves. We don't need a miracle. Inspired by God's wisdom and sensitive to His Spirit, we just need to take the bull by the horns ... Prayer may lead us to get our hands dirty.

Pray about some of the issues in James that are relevant to you (or others he doesn't mention). Pray for God's wisdom to deal with them in the right way ...

*Your footsteps are not easy to follow,
for they lead not only to green pastures
where we find nourishment and rest,
but also desert and wilderness places
where we are vulnerable and alone,
and crowded and uncomfortable spaces
where we feel threatened and distressed.
Your footsteps are not easy to follow,
but you have walked this way before
and are never far from any one of us,
your Spirit guiding and instructing,
your arm supporting, your love supplying,
on this necessary path we tread.
Amen*

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