



**November 2017**

**Who We Are  
What We Do  
Why We Do It**

**Readings, Reflections,  
Prayers about  
following Jesus and  
being His church**

**Dr. Bruce Martin  
First Baptist Church  
1614 – 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue S  
Lethbridge, AB T1J 0W3  
403-327-2082  
bruce@firstb.net  
www.firstb.net**

## Monday, November 6: Acts 2:36-47

When people heard about Jesus, how did they respond? They were baptized AND *"they were added to the church/their number that day"* (Acts 2:41). If you look back over the passages we have read about people coming to faith in Jesus, they were always baptized and were always enfolded in a community of believers.

Baptism is an outward act of obedience through which we affirm our faith in Jesus. Baptism does not save us. But it is a way we publicly express our faith to our friends, family, and others. It is us making a stand for Jesus. It is an act of obedience to His command. If we believe in Jesus and are not baptised, why not?

Being part of a church community does not save us either. It is a crucial way we stand firm in our faith, grow in knowledge and wisdom, and learn to put our faith into practice. Church is people and, since people are not perfect, no church is perfect. But church is a community of people worshipping with one another, encouraging one another, learning from one another, serving one another, caring for one another, forgiving one another, loving one another, AND sharing Jesus love and grace in Word and in deed in the world.

For good or for bad, Baptist churches have formalized this "being added to the church" as "church membership." Church membership is not some big, scary institutional thing. It is not a legal contract. It is not an exclusive club with insiders and outsiders. Membership is simply a way that we covenant with one another to be church together: loving, forgiving, encouraging, learning from, and caring for one another. It's affirming that we are a "family" – brothers and sisters in Christ who are always there for one another.

Of course, we can do all those great things without formally being a "member" just as we can believe in Jesus without being baptized. But just as baptism is a way we publicly identify with Jesus, membership is a public way we identify with Jesus' people in this church.

Being blunt: there is no down-side to being a member. You are not signing your life away. You will not be forced to be on a committee. You will not receive a bill in the mail. That's not what it's about.

Membership is about us, the community of faith at First Baptist, saying to you, with God's help and to the best of our ability, we will love you, comfort you, honor you, and walk with you through all the circumstances of life. And it is you, saying to us, with God's help and to the best of my ability, I will love you, comfort you, honor you, and walk with you through all the circumstances of life.

Being part of that kind of a family is a wonderful privilege and responsibility.

How is my church family, with all its failings, "family" to me? How can I be "family" to someone else?

*You have created us to live in community, O God of love;  
bless our friends who provide us with the grace and love of an extended family.  
Endow them with your blessings of health and mobility,  
that they may enjoy the wonders of your creation and share their delight with others.  
Bless them with keen minds and compassionate hearts  
that they may create a better life for all.  
Guard them from injustice, oppression, and evil  
that they may know freedom and hope lifelong.  
In their waking and in their sleeping,  
in their laughter and in their tears,  
surround them with your love  
until the end of their days;  
and so bring them to eternal life in peace.  
Through Jesus Christ, our Savior.  
Amen.*

Vienna Cobb Anderson

## Tuesday, November 7: Philippians 4:1-7

Since England's football (soccer) Premier League was established 25 years ago, the same four teams have won 23 of the 25 titles (Chelsea, Arsenal, Manchester United, Manchester City). Only twice in 25 years has any other team than those four won. The last time was in 2016. The David who defeated England's football Goliaths was lowly Leicester City. The British football world was stunned. How could this happen? Leicester City's payroll was a fraction of any of the Big Four. They had no superstars. How could they defeat the echelons of overpaid international superstars on the big teams week after week after week?

Lots of reasons have been cited for 5000 to 1 longshots, Leicester, winning the title. This is what the players say: *"Of all the factors, the most imperative has been the team spirit," former Leicester defender Matt Elliott told CNN. 'The players don't talk about themselves. It's a collective effort – 'we've got the spirit and the will to win.' The crux of this team is formed of players who were previously deemed not good enough for the Premier League. Marc Albrighton, released by recently relegated Aston Villa at the end of last season, has gone on to make the joint-highest appearances of any Leicester player this season. Mahrez alludes to this togetherness, potentially born out of rejection, as 'the revenge of the barefooted men.'"*

Team spirit. Collective effort. Togetherness. This rag tag team of "not good enough" players *worked as team* to beat out the more talented individuals playing for other clubs.

Another key was an atmosphere of fun. *"There were no mind games from manager Claudio Ranieri, just humble press conferences - and the promise of pizza for his players if they kept clean sheets (allowed no goals."* It was fun to play together. It was fun to follow Ranieri.

In Philippi, following Jesus wasn't particularly fun. The church was struggling. Team spirit was sagging. Why? Euodia and Syntyche were having a spat. Have you ever been in a church or other group where two people are fighting? Trying to divide the group? It's awful. What does Paul have to say about it?

After telling the two ladies to get over it, and encouraging the church to help them do so, he tells them to have fun again: *"Be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again – rejoice!"* When we are in conflict, joy, fun, and enthusiasm disappear. But when you bury the hatchet, and focus on the good news of Jesus, we rediscover the joy, excitement – and fun – of knowing and following Jesus.

If you have something – anything – against another person, let it go. Your anger will fade. You will sleep better. You won't grind your teeth. Your ulcer may improve. You will rediscover God's joy.

Need help? Pray about it. *"Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus."* That's good news.

This is what church, and church membership specifically, is all about – celebrating we are God's team. We publicly identify with His family. Together, with collective effort we can change the world. And along the way, will discover the joy of the Lord. We will enjoy His peace.

*Lord, grant me tenacious courage as I go through this day.  
When I am tempted to give up, help me to keep going.  
Grant me a cheerful spirit when things don't go my way.  
Give me courage to do whatever needs to be done.  
Lord, give me eyes to see my "neighbour" today –  
that person who is lonely, struggling, afraid, confused, needing hope, needing love.  
Give me the courage and the wisdom to be the presence of Jesus,  
the love of Jesus, the mercy of Jesus, and the compassion of Jesus.  
We are "the body of Christ" in our world – help me to be more and more like Jesus.  
In His name, Amen.*

### **Wednesday, November 8: Philippians 4:8-23**

What are you thinking about right now? What were you thinking about 15 minutes ago?

What is Paul encouraging us to think about?

- What things can you think about that are true?
- What things can you think about that are honorable?
- What things can you think about that are right?
- What things can you think about that are pure?
- What things can you think about that are lovely?
- What things can you think about that are admirable?
- What things can you think about that are excellent?
- What things can you think about that are worthy of praise?

This is the conclusion of Paul's letter to his friends in Philippi. Paul is now in prison in Rome. Even though he is alone, notice how his Christian friends care for him. If you remember, back on October 21 we read 2 Corinthians 8-9. The believers in Macedonia (including Philippi) were poor and persecuted. But they were far more generous to their brothers and sisters in need than the wealthy, successful, safe Corinthians.

Pray for Lisa Ratzlaff, from our own congregation, working with SIM in Zambia. She is helping establish a new youth ministry in Kasempa. Her hope is to bring school leaders together through a centre where evangelism and discipleship take place, skills training enables sustainability, life skills are promoted as an intervention against social problems, and education support is organized for orphans and the vulnerable. Check with the church office for the latest update from Lisa about her ministry, prayer and financial needs.

Pray for Becky Pater, from our own congregation, working with Power to Change at the University of Guelph, Ontario. Check with the church office (or John and Lidia Pater) to learn more about Becky's ministry.

Even though they are far away, these people are part of our body. They are members of our community, serving with us and for us in Canada and in Africa.

As we think about the best things we can pray for those whom God is using to build His Kingdom.

*"Dear Lord, I don't know who or what will cross my path today.  
But I do know that You are my Rock and my Fortress.  
You are my Shield and my Strong Tower.  
Help me to anchor myself to You today.  
Teach me how to stand strong in You and choose only Your way today.  
Help me walk by Your truth and not my feelings.  
Help me to embrace anything that comes my way as an opportunity to see You at work  
and as an opportunity to point others to You.  
Help me to pray for those in need and help practically in any way I can.  
Give me a heart of compassion and love.  
Thank You that You love me and nothing can ever take that away from me!  
Even if I fail today and fall short,  
You whisper Your unconditional love deep into my soul  
and remind me that Your mercies are new every morning.  
That truly amazes me, Lord.  
Thank You for meeting with me today.  
Would You wake me again tomorrow with the same sweet whisper of Your love?  
I can't wait to meet with You again.  
In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

Wendy Blight

## Thursday, November 9: Revelation 3:7-13

If Jesus were to write a letter to our church, what might He say?

In Revelation 2-3, Jesus writes letters to seven churches in what is now Turkey (we read his letter to Ephesus a couple of months ago). Each church has good things going on, and each has serious problems – except for one. The church in Philadelphia is the only one that Jesus simply encourages, affirms, and blesses. He is not critical of this church at all. The church's name, "Philadelphia" is Greek for "City of brotherly love" ("philia" is the Greek word for family love as opposed to "eros" passionate, sexual love).

What is it about this church that pleases Jesus?

- He has opened a door for them – an opportunity to be His witnesses and servants – AND they have walked through it. They have shared their faith and lived their faith.
- Even though they are weak, they have been faithful. Certain people have tried to lead them astray, but they have kept the faith.
- They have faced and will face tough times, but they have been faithful. God will get them through.

As members of our church community, it is good to pray through these challenges:

- What doors has God opened for us – locally? (your neighbours, soup kitchen, schools, housing, family, colleagues). What doors has God opened beyond ourselves? (Mill Creek Camp, Cuba). How can we share our faith and live our faith?
- We may feel weak: we struggle to meet our budget; we are all so busy; we are exhausted. But we can still be faithful. God has gotten us through in the past; He will get us through today.
- We can keep the faith. As members of the church we can encourage one another, learn from one another, pray for one another, help one another, and mentor one another.
- As brothers and sisters in Christ, we are in this together through good times and hard times, in times of blessing and in desert places, in sickness and in health. We are a family.

Thank God for our church family. We are not perfect. We fail. But we want to be God's people, together. How can we be a church of brotherly love? How can I be a positive, constructive, loving member of the family?

*I got up early one morning and rushed right into the day;  
I had so much to accomplish that I didn't have time to pray.  
Problems just tumbled about me, and heavier came each task;  
'Why doesn't God help me?' I wondered.  
He answered, 'You didn't ask.'  
I wanted to see joy and beauty but the day toiled on gray and bleak.  
I wondered why God didn't show me beauty.  
He said, 'But you didn't seek',  
I tried to come into God's presence;  
I used all my keys in the lock.  
God gently and lovingly chided, 'My child, you didn't knock.'  
I woke up early this morning, and paused before entering the day;  
I had so much to accomplish that I had to take time to pray.  
Lord, hear my prayer ...*

Unknown

## Friday, November 10: Acts 13:1-12

Do you ever feel like it's just "me against the world"? Do you feel like you're the only one pulling your weight? Do you feel like you're the only in your world who loves Jesus?

One of the fascinating themes running through the Gospels (the details of Jesus and His ministry), the Book of Acts (the story of the early church), and the various letters in the New Testament, is that Jesus and the early believers were rarely on their own. They were not Lone Rangers. Jesus and the early Christians were together with, found encouragement from, and were blessed by other people all the time.

When Barnabas and Saul (Paul) are called to be missionaries, their call comes in the context of community: they are praying together with trusted friends. When we are wrestling through major life challenges, sharing, talking, and praying with other godly, trustworthy people is wonderful.

Those of us who know a bit about Paul and his missionary journeys may assume he was a solo act, charging off on his own to share the good news, plant churches, and build the Kingdom. In fact, Saul/Paul is never alone. Here, he is with Barnabas and Mark. Even when Paul is in prison, he seems to have a network of friends visiting, checking in on him, and relaying messages for him regularly.

As we think about some of the ministries we do beyond ourselves, it's good to remember that we, as a church, are part of a much larger movement of the Spirit to build the Kingdom of God:

- People from our own congregation, members of our family – Lisa Ratzlaff (with SIM in Zambia) and Becky Pater (with Power to Change in Guelph, ON) – are **our** missionaries from our church. We can pray for them, encourage them, and support them.
- We are blessed to be able to work with Baptist churches in Cuba through Canadian Baptist Ministries. We can pray for them, encourage them, and support them.
- We are part of a network of 180 churches in Western Canada (Canadian Baptists of Western Canada) and camps (Mill Creek Camp). We can pray for them, encourage them, and support them.

And, as we live and share our faith in our homes, schools, workplaces, and recreational activities, we are not alone. We can encourage one another. We can pray for one another. We can support one another.

The humbling message of Acts 13 is that the Spirit of God will build His church. No power of evil – not even a nasty, influential “son of a devil” like Elymas – can stand against God’s power.

Thank God for the positive Christian friends and family in your life. Share with them. Encourage them. Pray with them. Remember those who are part of our extended family: Lisa Ratzlaff, Becky Pater, Cuban Baptists, Mill Creek, and more. Pray for them, too.

*Dear Lord, help me remember what a difference it makes  
when I make time with You a priority in my morning.  
Awaken me in body and spirit each day with a desire to meet with You  
and to hear You speak words of affirmation, assurance and wisdom over my heart  
as I prepare to go into my day.  
I pray today for those from our own congregation serving in other places:  
I pray for Lisa Ratzlaff and the people she works with in Zambia ...  
I pray for Becky Pater and her ministry with students in Guelph ...  
As I go to my day, may I think on what is true, and honorable, and right.  
Help me think on what is pure, and lovely, and admirable.  
Help me think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.  
Lord God of peace, be with me this day.  
Amen.*

## **Saturday, November 11: Colossians 4:2-18 Remembrance Day**

*"Remember my chains,"* says Paul. Paul is in prison in Rome.

Despite his personal plight, Paul cares for others. He has discovered that though his circumstances have

changed radically, he can still have a powerful ministry, encouraging and praying for others. When we are struggling or when our circumstances or abilities change, we wonder if we still have any value. We do. We can always choose to encourage. We can always choose to pray.

Today is a day we choose to remember.

- We choose to remember the horror of war and pray for peace.
- We choose to remember those who served in the past (many of whom died) to oppose evil and to protect our freedom.
- We choose to remember those serving as peacekeepers and peacemakers around the world today.

It is good for us to pray for those who serve in troubled parts of the world, their families, our leaders who make choices that affect our service people, and those who have been injured and continue to suffer.

*Today we pray for the members of the Canadian Armed Forces deployed throughout the world:  
We pray that those in our Armed Services might know you, Jesus,  
and be open to your Spirit's leading, guidance, wisdom, and protection.*

*We pray that they may discharge their duties with honour and dignity,  
remain ever mindful to defend all human rights, especially for the most vulnerable,  
as they labour to bring peace and comfort in places torn by war or disaster.*

*We pray for the families, relatives and friends of our military personnel:  
that they may be comforted by the Holy Spirit during their time of separation  
and be filled with joy when their loved ones return.*

*We pray for the members of the Department of National Defense community  
who have been killed or injured for the cause of peace:  
that their sacrifice may not be in vain,  
and their families and friends will experience the comfort and strength of the Holy Spirit.*

*We pray, particularly, for those who are injured and are rebuilding their lives.  
May your Spirit inspire them, heal them, and surround them with godly people.*

*We pray for the Prime Minister and our political and military leaders:  
that they may tirelessly seek peaceful settlements to international disputes.  
We pray for all nations: that they may be preserved from violence or terrorism.*

*We pray for all men and women involved in conflict areas:  
that all hearts may be moved to pursue justice and peace.*

*Lord, give all of us courage, hope and strength.  
Strengthen our resolve to promote peace and security in every land.  
Lord, let there be peace on Earth, and let I begin with me.  
Help me to be a peacemaker in my own family and community.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord.  
Amen*

## **Sunday, November 12: Jeremiah 29:1-14**

Why do we do what we do? That's the theme running through our daily readings and our sermons this Fall. It's interesting to go through our weekly bulletin or monthly calendar and ask about every single thing, "Why do we do this?" It is very possible to do lots of stuff without knowing why. It's possible, personally and as a church, to be really, really busy doing things that just don't matter.

In Jeremiah 29, Jeremiah is speaking to God's people in exile in Babylon. They are dreaming about a future when they return home to Israel. Their faith is all about the future. They are (1) just trudging grumpily through life looking forward to one day, some day being back in Jerusalem, or (2) living just like the Babylonians until they go home.

Some Christians live like this: our faith is only future-focused. One day, some day we will be with Jesus so either (1) we trudge miserably through life looking forward to that time, or (2) we live like everyone else and we'll get serious about God once we're in heaven.

This is what Jeremiah says to his people, and to us:

- *Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens, and eat the food they produce.*
- *Marry and have children. Then find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away!*
- *Work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile.*
- *Pray to the Lord for it.*

**What do we do?** This is your home for the moment. Settle down. Don't just trudge through. Get engaged in your community. Live your faith. Seek to bring God's peace and "shalom" – well-being/justice/kingdom-rule – in your community. Pray for your neighbours, friends, leaders, and neighbours in your community. Make a difference for Jesus, right where you are. In the words of Francis de Sales (1567-1622), Bishop of Geneva, "*bloom where you are planted.*"

**Why do we do this?** "*For its welfare will determine your welfare*" (29:7). When we live our faith, and seek the peace and well-being of our community, everyone benefits – including us. When we help feed the hungry, clothe those in need, support those who need a helping hand, visit the lonely, and encourage the downcast, we make the world – our world – a better place. Our community thrives. And we thrive. That's why we do a lot of the things we do: we are living out our faith and seeking to see His kingdom come and His will be done in our neighbourhoods, just as in heaven. We want to live faithfully for Jesus.

Yes, one day, some day we will be with the Lord (29:8-14).<sup>1</sup> But that's off in the future. In the meantime, in this life, we just do it. We live our faith in word (sharing God's good news about Jesus) and in deed (through practical action and service). We are God's people, engaged in and praying for our community.

How can you work for the peace and prosperity of our community? Pay to the Lord for our city.

*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 the Word and not my feelings.  
Help me to keep my heart pure and undivided.  
Protect me from my own careless thoughts, words, and actions.  
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.  
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 morning.  
Lord, help me to forever remember what a gift it is to sit with You like this.  
Amen*

Lysa Terkeurst

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<sup>1</sup> The well-known verse, "*I know the plans I have for you,*" says the Lord. "*They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope*" (29:11) is about **the future**. For the Israelites it's 70 years away, long after the present generation will be dead. For us it is a metaphor of being with the Lord in heaven, not a promise of health and wealth today, in this life. Sorry.

## Monday, November 13: 1 Thessalonians 1

Following God in a culture where most people don't know or care about Him is challenging. That was the reality for Jeremiah and his people (yesterday's reading). That's our reality. Following Jesus where people **actively oppose** Jesus is even more difficult. That is the reality in the Macedonian city of Thessalonica.

In Acts 17, Luke tells how Paul and Silas teach about Jesus in Thessalonica. Some of the Jews gather troublemakers from the marketplace, form a mob, and start a riot. They attack the home of Jason, a follower of Jesus, looking for Paul and Silas. The mob wants to drag them out to beat them. Not finding Paul and Silas, they haul Jason and other believers before the city council where they are forced to post bond to be released. When Paul and Silas move 70 kilometres down the road to Berea, the mob follows them to stir up trouble (a long way to walk just to cause a riot). Thessalonica is a tough place to follow Jesus.

When Paul speaks of "*endurance*"(1:3) and "*severe suffering*"(1:6) he knows what he is talking about. He has credibility. Thessalonica is not an easy city in which to follow Jesus!

- Paul encourages us that "*God loves you and has chosen you to be his own people*"(1:4). What does it mean to you that God has chosen you? Have you ever reflected on that truth? Spend some time appreciating His love for you.
- His gospel comes to us "*not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit*"(1:5). What does that mean to you? The Holy Spirit is in you; how does that change how you live?
- Our faith gives us "*joy*"through the Holy Spirit even in hard places (1:6). Is that your experience? How do you experience God's joy? If this is not your experience, how can you cultivate joy?

In the rough, tough, hostile town of Thessalonica, the believers are known for their "*faithful work, loving deeds, and the enduring hope because of our Lord Jesus Christ*"(1:3). In fact, Paul says, "*Now the word of the Lord is ringing out from you to people everywhere ... for wherever we go we find people telling us about your faith in God. ... They speak of how you are looking forward to the coming of God's Son from heaven – Jesus, whom God raised from the dead*"(1:8-10).

These people are working for the peace and well-being of their city. Through faithful work and loving deeds they are living their faith visible through practical acts of love and mercy. Like other early churches they are caring for the poor, providing for those in need, visiting the sick and dying, caring for the hurting and lonely. Through sharing their hope in Jesus in word, they are spreading the good news about God's grace and love. We can be sure they are praying to their community as well.

We give to the Food Bank, volunteer at the Soup Kitchen, sponsor our refugee family, sew for Days for Girls, visit shut-ins, and serve the churches in Cuba (our mission trips) because this is what the people of God do. Through our faithful work and loving deeds, we share our faith in God. How can I help out practically?

Through sharing our faith in Jesus, the word of the Lord rings out everywhere, too. With whom can I share the hope I have because of our Lord Jesus Christ?

*Lord, thank You for the people You have divinely placed in my life  
who speak holy truth, love and words of wisdom.  
Give me a heart of discernment to hear your instruction for my heart and my circumstances.  
Give me the strength and courage to follow through with that advice, even when it's hard.  
Fill me with peace in knowing that even if I take a wrong turn, Your purpose will prevail.  
May there be opportunity for me, today, to be a blessing to another person:  
In Word: sharing the hope and love of Jesus  
In deed: providing comfort, encouragement or practical care.  
May Your Kingdom come and Your will be done in me. And through me.  
In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

based on a prayer by Tracie Miles

## Tuesday, November 14: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-16

Many of us love Jeremiah 29:11: *"I know the plans I have for you," says the Lord. "They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope."* We "claim" it is God's promise to us **today**. But we yank it out of context. We forget it was God's promise for a specific people in a specific circumstance, about a future blessing **70 years later!** For us, it is a promise for the future too: when we are with the Lord hereafter. In the meantime, Jeremiah's people – and us – are to be about the business of doing faithful work, loving deeds, sharing our hope in Jesus, and praying for our city. We live our faith here. Now.

The present can be tough. *"You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches (in Judea/Israel) suffered from the Jews"*(2:14). This was true in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9). Suffering was the experience of many early Christians. The Christians in Judea suffered persecution (Paul had been part of that). Paul and his companions suffered throughout Asia Minor (now Turkey) and Greece (Philippi). Down the road their suffering would increase, rather than decrease, under emperors like Trajan and Nero.

Sometimes we are given the impression that if we become Christians, our lives will suddenly become peaceful, safe, and blessed (financially, health-wise, etc). Sometimes we are blessed in these ways by God – thank Him; enjoy those moments! But other times life is difficult. But God gets us through. Paul and his friends went through horrendous experiences, but did so keeping themselves *"devout and honest and faultless"*(v.10). Through their personal pain, they loved the believers in Thessalonica as if they were their own children, pleading, encouraging, and urging them to live lives God would consider worthy (2:11-12).

When life is good it is easy to forget about God. When life is tough we are forced to depend upon His Spirit every moment of every day. Paul's challenge to us is to stay close to the Lord during the good and the hard times – stay devout and honest and faultless (or *"holy, righteous and blameless"*).

The Jewish wisdom book, *Ecclesiasticus*, records these insights: *"My child, if you would fear the Lord, prepare yourself for an ordeal. Be sincere of heart, be steadfast, and do not be alarmed when disaster comes. Cling to him and do not leave him, so that you may be honoured at the end of your days. Whatever happens to you, accept it, and in the uncertainty of your humble state, be patient. For gold is tested in the fire, and the chosen in the furnace of humiliation. Trust him and he will uphold you, follow a straight path and hope in him.*

*"You who fear the Lord, wait for his mercy; do not turn aside for fear you fall. You who fear the Lord, trust him, and you will not be robbed of your reward. You who fear the Lord, hope for good gifts of his, everlasting joy and mercy. Look to the generations of old and see: whoever trusted in the Lord and was put to shame? Or whoever, steadfastly fearing him, was forsaken? Or whoever called to him and was ignored? For the Lord is compassionate and merciful, he forgives sins and saves in time of distress"*(Ecclesiasticus 2:1-11). There is helpful and profound wisdom in these words!

Paul challenges us to reach out and care for others, even when we struggle. The best antidote to our own suffering and pain is to care for others. Encourage, comfort and urge others to live lives worthy of God, who calls them into His kingdom and glory. Help them out. Bless them. Care for them. We are in this together.

*Lord, I'm here today with open hands and an open heart,  
ready to depend on you to help me through the day and all it will bring my way.  
Help me be like Nehemiah (or Jeremiah, or Paul),  
help me come to you for guidance, strength, provision and protection.  
As I face tough choices and hard situations, help me remember my beloved-ness:  
help me remember that I am Your child,  
and help me remember I am Your representative to the world around me.  
Help me live, today, in a way that brings honor to Your holy name.  
In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

Charles Stanley

### Wednesday, November 15: 1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:13

Yes, life can be difficult. Paul and Silas were forced out of Thessalonica after being there less than a month. Their critics followed them to Berea (Acts 17:13). They continued to experience opposition in other cities.

We need to be honest with ourselves and other people. Even for Christians, problems come. Difficulties happen. Sickness and death are real parts of life. In a rather cynical statement, in the movie, *The Princess Bride*, one character muses, "Life is pain: anyone who tells you otherwise is trying to sell you something." That might be a bit too hardnosed. But it has a ring of truth. Oswald Chambers writes, "God does not waste suffering, nor does He discipline out of caprice. If He plows, it is because He proposes a crop."

Sometimes we present the good news of the gospel too much the opposite way: we suggest if you believe in Jesus life will be **SO** good: you'll be healthy, wealthy and "blessed." We may present a Jesus who wants us all to be rich, perfectly healthy, and enjoying the comforts of life. But then, when people experience the pain of real life, their faith can't cope with reality. What do you do when you've been promised a Jesus-who-gives-you-all-the-comforts-in-this world and it doesn't happen? Paul wonders if, under duress, the Thessalonian Christians might fall away from following Jesus. Would we?

Writing later, Paul will say, "*We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ... We do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal*" (2 Corinthians 4:8-17). When hard times come (as they will) we know God is with us through them all.

As we live through new challenges and new experiences, we wrestle with how our faith shapes our lives in these times. We all need to keep learning. Being a disciple/follower/student of Jesus is a lifelong process of being teachable – by the word of God, by other mature Christians, and directly from the Holy Spirit. And we all need to keep living our faith in word and in deed. We show God's love practically.

- Are you a teachable person?
- Do you wrestle through how your faith shapes your life?
- Do you ask questions about how you could or should respond to personal, civic, and international issues as a Christian?
- Do you pray about how we can make a difference in our community practically?
- Are you restless, thinking you can do something for the Lord?

This kind of "holy discontent" is good. It keeps us growing – invigorated – spiritually.

*Lord, we are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed;  
perplexed, but not in despair;  
persecuted, but not abandoned;  
struck down, but not destroyed.  
Help us to know our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory  
that far outweighs them all.  
Help us to fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen.  
Give us faith in Jesus.  
Lord, thank You for looking beyond my faults and for loving me unconditionally.  
Forgive me when I fail to love others in the same way.  
Give me eyes to see the needs of the people in my life,  
and show me how to meet those needs in a way that pleases You.  
In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

based on 2 Corinthians 4 and a prayer by Mary Southerland

## Thursday, November 16: 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12

What do we do as a church? What do we do personally? Listen to Paul's counsel:

- *"Live in a way that pleases God ..."*
- *"God's will is for you to be holy ..."*
- *"Love each other ..."*
- *"Live a quiet life, minding your own business ..."*

(Why would this have been particularly good counsel in Thessalonica [see Acts 17:1-9])

Twice he adds words to the effect that, *"You live this way already, and we encourage you to do so even more."* Following Jesus is a matter of life-long learning. It is also a matter of life-long improvement. We are not perfect yet. We never will be. Our challenge is never to give up and say, *"I'm good enough,"* or *"I have arrived,"* or *"I know what I need to know to live as a Christian; I can stop learning and thinking now."*

We are called to constant and never-ending improvement. We are never *"good enough."* Every day we face new challenges that push us to think through how our faith shapes our decisions and our lives.

Why do we do this? *"Then people who are not Christians will respect the way you live ..."* People saw the faithful work, loving deeds, and the hope the early believers had in Jesus. Their faithful lives were living sermons. When we live our faith in practice and in word, people see Jesus is us, too.

We don't have to be perfect. We do have to be honest. As we are genuine about our lives, including being honest we're not perfect yet, people see the reality of God's work in our lives. People can accept our problems, when we admit them honestly. They respect us when we have the integrity to recognize our weaknesses. They respect us when we confess our sins. They respect us even more when they see our resolve to keep on trying to be more and more like Jesus. We never stop trying to be a bit more loving, a bit more joyful, a bit more of a peacemaker, a bit more patient, a bit more kind, a bit more good, a bit more faithful, a bit more gentle, and a bit more self-controlled (Galatians 5:22-23).

*"God's will is for you to be holy ... You live this way already, but do so even more."* Lord, help me know how this applies to my life.

*Father of love, hear my prayer.  
Help me to know Your will  
and to do it with courage and faith.  
Accept my offering of myself,  
all my thoughts, words, deeds, and sufferings.  
May my life be spent giving You glory.  
Give me the strength to follow Your call,  
so that Your Truth may live in my heart  
and bring peace to me and to those I meet,  
for I believe in Your Love.  
Amen*

## Friday, November 17: 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

We live in a tension. On the one hand, we are *"looking forward to the coming of God's Son from heaven"* (1 Thessalonians 1:10). On the other hand, we live moment-by-moment with faithful work and loving deeds (1:3). The Thessalonians lived in that same tension: you seek the peace and well-being and pray for your city now, and you look forward to the end of exile/eternal life seventy years down the road.

One of the issues in Thessalonica was the fate of their fellow believers who had died. Paul's answer is simple: Jesus died but was raised to life again. In the same way, we will die but be raised to life again.

Paul encourages us, "we will be with the Lord forever" (4:17). A lot has been made of what this might look like, how this will transpire, and what our personal experience will be.<sup>2</sup> Paul's point is not to deal with technical questions like when and how a "rapture" might take place ("rapture" is not actually a word in the Bible). As one writer reminds us, "Christian language about the future is a set of signposts pointing into a mist. Signposts don't normally provide you with advance photographs of what you'll find at the end of the road, but that doesn't mean they aren't pointing in the right direction" (N.T. Wright).

These verses in Thessalonians DO tell us about:

- *Jesus* – He is resurrected now; He will be personally physically present with His people again one day in the future;
- *Those who have died who believe* – they will be resurrected to eternal life with Jesus;
- *Christians alive when Jesus returns* – they will be "transformed" with bodies like those who are resurrected (1 Corinthians 15:41-54; Philippians 3:21); and
- *Our eternal reality* – we will be with the Lord forever.

Paul's concern is pastoral: he wants suffering people to know that there will be a resurrection of all people and that ultimately those of us who believe, and our loved ones who believe, will be with the Lord forever.<sup>3</sup>

Paul's words in 5:1-3 echo the warnings of Jesus: "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come" (Mark 13:32-33). Jesus uses a variety of parables to talk about this: virgins and lamps, people given talents (units of money, not abilities), sheep and goats (all in Matthew 25), watchful gatekeepers (Mark 13:34-37), etc.

Paul uses metaphors to try to speak of this mystery, too. The Lord's return will be like

- A thief coming in the night ... what does that suggest? No warning? What else (think on it)?
- A woman going into labour ... what does that suggest? A surprise? What else (think on it)?

Therefore, we should be like a wide-awake, sober person putting on his armour ... what does that suggest? Alertness? Preparation? What else (think on it)?<sup>4</sup>

Paul's main concern, again, is pastoral: how should you live knowing Jesus will return, the dead will be resurrected, those who are still living will be transformed, and we will be with the Lord forever?

- Live as a "child of the light" or a "child of the day" – what does this mean to you?<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Popular "rapture theology" (which only goes back to the late 1820's) being one example. Rapture theology, as usually presented, is difficult to reconcile with other scriptures about the future, including 1 Corinthians 15:23-54 and Philippians 3:20-21 (also written by Paul). The speculation and discussion often obscures the real good news here: we will enjoy resurrected bodies in Jesus' presence.

<sup>3</sup> The imagery used in 4:15-17 was more familiar to Paul's first readers than to us. Many of Thessalonian believers were Jewish, steeped in the Old Testament (Acts 17:4) and would easily understand the metaphors Paul is using.

- They would know the story of Moses coming down the mountain after being away a long time, to personally lead his people (Exodus 32). Jesus' return is similar; He will return to lead His people: hopefully they are more faithful than Moses' folks.
- They would know Daniel 7, which describes the persecuted people of God vindicated over their pagan enemies by the coming of "one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven." Paul says Jesus' return is similar; He will come back to, be with, save and protect His people during their times of suffering and lead them into a time of resurrection and peace.
- They lived in a culture where, when a king or emperor came to visit a town, you went **out of your city** to greet him (remember Jesus' entry into Jerusalem). You didn't wait at home until he arrived. You wanted to be part of the celebration, so you would go **out** to meet the king and escort him into the city. Paul is saying Jesus, the King of kings, is returning. Using the example from his culture, he says believers will want go **out** to meet Him, then escort Him back to our world, where He will reign, judge, and set things right.

There is lots of imagery to think about here. Ultimately is what's important is the truth of Jesus' coming, our resurrection, and His presence. The practical details, times, and how-it-all-happens, we'll just have to wait and see.

<sup>4</sup> For a good giggle, picture the opposite – a drunken, half-asleep person trying to put on armour – ouch! As the warnings on TV say, "Kids, don't try this at home!"

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps think about the opposite – what would a "child of darkness" or a "child of the night" be like? In contrast then, what would a "child of the light" or a "child of the day" be like?

- *Be alert and self-controlled* – in what areas of your life do you struggle with self-control?
- *Let faith and love guard your heart* – do you get overly stressed, worried, fearful ... how does this hurt you? ... how can you work on your understanding of faith and God's love to know His peace and joy?
- *Make the hope of salvation the protection for your mind* ... do you find yourself doubting? Wandering off in strange directions? Struggling with obscure issues? Hold onto Jesus as the anchor of your faith;
- *Encourage one another and build each other up.*<sup>6</sup>

*Father in Heaven,  
 You made me Your child  
 and called me to walk in the Light of Christ.  
 Free me from darkness  
 and keep me in the Light of Your Truth.  
 The Light of Jesus has scattered  
 the darkness of hatred and sin.  
 Called to that Light,  
 I ask for Your guidance.  
 Mold my life in Your Truth.  
 Fill my heart in Your Love.  
 Give me the power of Your Grace  
 that I may walk in the Light of Jesus  
 and serve Him faithfully.  
 Amen.*

### **Saturday, November 18: 1 Thessalonians 5:9-28**

What do we do? Why do we do it? It's a creative, dynamic tension between sharing our faith in Word (the good news about Jesus) and sharing our faith in deed (living our faith in practice).

Paul writes, "*Encourage one another and build each other up ...*" (5:11). He goes on to provide practical suggestions about what that looks like. His advice is pretty straightforward. Read it over several times. What is God saying to you?

To help you read this passage with fresh eyes, here it is in Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*:

*"And now, friends, we ask you to honor those leaders who work so hard for you, who have been given the responsibility of urging and guiding you along in your obedience. Overwhelm them with appreciation and love!*

*"Get along among yourselves, each of you doing your part. Our counsel is that you warn the freeloaders to get a move on. Gently encourage the stragglers, and reach out for the exhausted, pulling them to their feet. Be patient with each person, attentive to individual needs. And be careful that when you get on each other's nerves you don't snap at each other. Look for the best in each other, and always do your best to bring it out.*

*"Be cheerful no matter what; pray all the time; thank God no matter what happens. This is the way God wants you who belong to Christ Jesus to live.*

*"Don't suppress the Spirit, and don't stifle those who have a word from the Master. On the other hand, don't be gullible. Check out everything, and keep only what's good. Throw out anything tainted with evil. May God himself, the God who makes everything holy and whole, make you holy and whole, put you*

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<sup>6</sup> *"Just as in fact you are doing"* (5:11) – Paul encourages them that they are already doing this. But we can always do better at this sort of thing, can't we? Paul encourages us toward constant improvement in the same way in 1 Thessalonians 4:1, 10.

*together — spirit, soul, and body — and keep you fit for the coming of our Master, Jesus Christ. The One who called you is completely dependable. If he said it, he'll do it!*

*"Friends, keep up your prayers for us. Greet all the followers of Jesus there with a holy embrace. And make sure this letter gets read to all the brothers and sisters. Don't leave anyone out. The amazing grace of Jesus Christ be with you!"*

We can live out our faith following Jesus' great commands to *"love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind soul, and strength,"* and to *"love our neighbour as ourselves"* in Word and in deed.

The amazing grace of Jesus Christ be with you, today!

*Almighty and Eternal God,  
I pray you would give me the great gift of inward peace.  
Command the winds and storms of my unruly passions.  
By Your grace, subdue my proneness to love created things too much.  
Give me an acceptance of suffering for Your sake.  
Make me patient and kind to others,  
that I may avoid quarrels and contentions.  
Teach me constantly to seek after and to acquire  
Help me to live this day fully and completely in your will,  
Even as I look ahead to eternal life with you.  
Only this life, lived in the creative tension of obedience to you now and hope for the future  
brings interior peace.  
Amen*

### **Sunday, November 19: 1 Peter 1:1-12**

Who are we as a church? What do we do? Why do we do it? Those are the questions we have been thinking about this Fall.

**Who are we?** Peter says we are people, beloved and saved by God: *"by his great mercy that we have been born again, because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead"* (1:3). He goes on, *"Now we live with great expectation, and we have a priceless inheritance – an inheritance that is kept in heaven for you, pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay. And through your faith, God is protecting you by his power until you receive this salvation, which is ready to be revealed on the last day for all to see"* (1:4-5).

Look back at 1:1. Peter also says, we are *"God's chosen people who are living **as foreigners.**"* Most people in the early church were **not** Roman citizens: they were typically poor, slaves, displaced people, Jewish migrants, and other people with no legal or social status.<sup>7</sup> They were literally foreigners. They had no citizenship. Peter is reminding them that because of their salvation, God's gift through Jesus, they are FULL citizens of the Kingdom of God. They are His chosen people. This a HUGE blessing for the people to whom Peter is writing – the poor, slaves, outcasts – who were not really "people" at all in the Roman world.

Because we Canadians cannot appreciate how horrible it would be to have no citizenship. No rights, no value, no identity the way most people in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century did, we cannot really comprehend how amazing our new identity in God's family really is. Perhaps only a refugee on the run, without a home, without a citizenship, without papers, without anything, could comprehend the wonder of now being a full citizen of the Kingdom of God, with all the rights and privileges associated with it.

One of the themes that comes through Peter's letter is that those of us who believe and love Jesus are ALL

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<sup>7</sup> To be a Roman citizen, you had to be male. Only men born to Roman citizen parents (ethnic Romans) were legally Roman citizens. By the time of Jesus, a very wealthy non-citizen could purchase Roman citizenship. Or citizenship could be granted to a non-citizen for exceptional service to the Emperor. A very small minority of people (all men) in the Roman Empire were actually citizens.

equal, ALL one, ALL full citizens in the Kingdom of God. There are not first-class citizens and second-class citizens. There are not some citizens who are "more special" or "less special" because of their ethnicity, gender, income, education, gifts, or abilities. There are not "priests" (who are closer to God and can do certain religious things) and "non-priests" (who are less close to God and cannot do the religious rituals). We are ALL equal, and we are ALL in this Kingdom life, together, thanks to God's grace and mercy.

We are also ALL spiritual "foreigners." While politically we may be citizens of Canada, spiritually we are citizens of the Kingdom of God. Both of those citizenships come with rights, privileges, and responsibilities. As citizens of the Kingdom of God, **what do we do?** What are our

- Rights?
- Privileges?
- Responsibilities?

*"Prepare your minds for action and exercise self-control. Put all your hope in the gracious salvation that will come to you when Jesus Christ is revealed to the world. Live as God's obedient children. Don't slip back into your old ways of living to satisfy your own desires. You didn't know any better then. But now you must be holy in everything you do, just as God who chose you is holy. For the Scriptures say, "You must be holy because I am holy" (1:13-16). How can we live out Peter's challenge?*

*Breathe into me, Holy Spirit, that my thoughts may all be holy.  
Move in me, Holy Spirit, that my work, too, may be holy.  
Protect me, Holy Spirit, that I may always be holy.  
Attract my heart, Holy Spirit, that I may love only what is holy.  
Strengthen me, Holy Spirit, that I may defend all that is holy.  
Guide me, Holy Spirit, that I may invite others to You, who are holy.  
Empower me, Holy Spirit, that I may serve others in ways that are holy.  
Fill me, Holy Spirit, that all I say and do brings honour to You, the One who is All Holy.  
Amen*

### **Monday, November 20: 1 Peter 1:13-2:3**

Who are we? What do we do?

#### ***Who are we?***

1. We are "temporary residents" here (1:17). Our real identity is as citizens of the Kingdom of God.
2. We are people who are saved by Jesus love and His death on the cross (1:18-20).
3. We are people who trust in God and place our faith and hope in God (1:21).
4. We are people whose sin is forgiven by God's grace, through Jesus (1:22).
5. We are people who have been born again, to new life will last forever (1:23).

Read through each of those five verses/sections of scripture a few times. What does each one mean to you?

Notice there are no "extra special" people who receive a special blessing. We ALL receive ALL of God's love, grace, mercy, hope, and life that come through Jesus. We are all fully blessed in Jesus.

#### ***What do we do?***

1. We prepare our minds for action and exercise self-control (1:13).
2. We put all our hope in the gracious salvation that will come to you when Jesus Christ is revealed to the world (1:13).
3. We choose to live as God's obedient children. We don't slip back into your old ways of living to satisfy your own desires (1:14).
4. We choose to be holy in everything we do (1:15).

5. We show sincere love to each other. We love one another deeply with all our heart (1:22).
6. We get rid of all evil behavior. We are done with all deceit, hypocrisy, jealousy, and all unkind speech (2:1).
7. We yearn to grow spiritually, to fully experience all salvation means (2:2-3).

Notice there is not one standard of behaviour for some Christians (like pastors), and another "for the rest of us." We are ALL called to live holy, faithful, loving, gracious, forgiving lives. We sometimes have the idea that some people (like leaders/pastors) are called to a higher standard than the rest of us. In fact, we are ALL called to a high standard. Because we ALL are saved by Jesus and we are ALL blessed with His Spirit, we are ALL called to live for Him. What is the Spirit saying to me?

*Almighty and Eternal God,  
I pray for the great gift of inward peace.  
Command the winds and storms of my unruly passions.  
By Your grace,  
Subdue my proneness to love created things too much.  
Help me to accept suffering for Your sake.  
Make me patient, forgiving, and kind to others.  
May your grace to me shape my grace to others.  
Teach me constantly to seek after your truth.  
Help me to become more and more like Jesus.  
Allow me to welcome your Spirit into all parts of my life.  
Only You, and you alone, can bring me perfect peace.  
Amen*

## **Tuesday, November 21: 1 Peter 2:4-12**

**Who are we?** Back in September we looked at 1 Peter 2:9: "*You are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.*" We are people loved by God, saved by Jesus, filled with His Spirit, called to be His light in the darkness.

**What do we do?** We live our faith. We try to live as Jesus would live if He were here. Peter writes, "*You are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple*" (2:5). How important are you to the Kingdom of God? To the church? Indispensable! Without you, the building is incomplete.

As a living stone built into His Temple, you are part of something much bigger than yourself or even just "you and Jesus." You are part of the church. You are important to other people: they are counting on you. And, you need other people to help you stay solid, strong, and "in the right place." What would happen to a Temple if one of the stones decided that they could be "church at home" and no longer be part of the overall building? How useful is a stone that is off by itself?

Being a stone in a building is not always easy. Your neighbour stones may grate you the wrong way. They may squeeze you. They may have sharp bits that irritate you. But that's OK. You grate, squeeze, and irritate others, too. For the sake of God's Kingdom, we choose to forgive, love, and carry on ...

**Who are we?** "*What's more, you are his holy priests*" (1 Peter 2:5).

**What do we do?** Priests do two things: they bring God's love and truth **to people**, and they bring the people's prayers and needs **to God**. We are people who (1) bring God's love and truth through Word and deed to people, and (2) pray to God for people. This is not something just pastors/clergy do. It is something we ALL do, because of who we are: people loved by, saved by, and empowered by God! Now we are ALL called to live as God's chosen people, royal priests, and holy nation. We are ALL His own possession, ALL called to show others the goodness of God.

Jesus is building a new Kingdom, with a new Temple, a spiritual Temple built out of people like you and me. We tend to read 1 Peter 2 very personally: "You (singular) are a chosen person. You (singular) are a royal priest, a citizen of a holy nation, God's very own possession" (2:9). In fact, it is written in the plural, "You (all together) are a chosen people," Peter says. "You (all together) are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession."

And we have a mission: to help other people meet and know God as King and Saviour: "you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light" (2:9).

How can I be His priest?

- How can I bring God's love and truth through Word and deed to people? How can I share His mercy and love? How can I practically help out/encourage/bless someone, today?
- How can I pray to God for people? Who can I pray for, today?

How can we, as a church, be God's priests?

- How can we bring God's love and truth through Word and deed to people? How can we share His mercy and love? How can we practically help out/encourage/bless others, today?
- How can we pray to God for people? Who can we pray for, today?

*Christ, as a light, illumine and guide me.*

*Christ, as a shield, overshadow me.*

*Christ under me;*

*Christ over me;*

*Christ beside me, on my left and my right.*

*This day be within and without me,*

*lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.*

*Be in the heart of each to whom I speak;  
in the mouth of each who speaks unto me.*

*This day be within and without me,*

*lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.*

*Christ as a light;*

*Christ as a shield;*

*Christ beside me, on my left and my right.*

*Amen*

### **Wednesday, November 22: 1 Peter 2:11-25 Ladies' Supper, 5:30 pm**

Peter, living during a time of intense persecution, writes this letter to new believers: mostly poor, mostly non-Roman citizens, all new followers of Jesus. Peter wants to encourage us ALL that we are God's beloved, holy people, full citizens of His Kingdom. He wants us ALL to live faithful, holy, loving lives realizing this may lead to suffering and persecution. And he wants us ALL to know that following Jesus can be tough.

- "Keep away from worldly desires that wage war against your very souls." What do you think he is referring to? What "worldly desires" do you struggle with? What will you do about it?
- "Be careful to live properly among your unbelieving neighbors. Then even if they accuse you of doing wrong, they will see your honorable behavior, and they will give honor to God when he judges the world." What are the implications for you?
- "For the Lord's sake, respect all human authority – whether the king as head of state, or the officials he has appointed ... Fear God, and respect the king." Peter – and other Christians – are being brutally persecuted by Emperor Nero. How can he say this? What does that look like? How can I respect the government even when I disagree with them?
- "It is God's will that your honorable lives should silence those ignorant people who make foolish accusations against you." Would people look at my life and see my integrity as a Christian?

- *"For you are free, yet you are God's slaves, so don't use your freedom as an excuse to do evil."* Just because we are forgiven doesn't give us license to go crazy.
- *Respect everyone, and love your Christian brothers and sisters.*" How can I put that into practice?

Many of the people to whom Peter is writing are slaves. Read what he says to them: *"You who are slaves must accept the authority of your masters with all respect. Do what they tell you – not only if they are kind and reasonable, but even if they are cruel. For God is pleased with you when you do what you know is right and patiently endure unfair treatment. Of course, you get no credit for being patient if you are beaten for doing wrong"*(2:18-20). Is that fair??? Absolutely not! But sometimes as God's people we suffer in a world that doesn't treat us fairly. It didn't treat Jesus fairly, either! But we have an eternal perspective on life ...

So Peter, who witnessed how horribly the world treated Jesus, says, *"But if you suffer for doing good and endure it patiently, God is pleased with you. For God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in his steps."* We identify more with Jesus when we suffer for His sake. As we are treated poorly, we feel how poorly He was treated – for our sakes. We appreciate His love for us more profoundly. Our faith is stretched and grows.

We're OK with missionaries and those sorts of people having it tough: they sign up for it. They are "super-spiritual," aren't they? But we, ordinary Christians, should have an easy time of it, right? In the Bible, however, we are ALL in this together, in good times and in hard times. We are equally "spiritual."

Saints of the past used to consider it an honour to be mistreated for the sake of Jesus. Maybe, when hardship comes your way, you could see it as an opportunity to reflect on the suffering that Jesus was willing to endure – for you. Think about the depth of His love – for you. How can you show His love, today?

*Lord, You have always given bread for the coming day;  
and though I am poor, today I believe.  
Lord, You have always given strength for the coming day;  
and though I am weak, today I believe.  
Lord, You have always given peace for the coming day;  
and though of anxious heart, today I believe.  
Lord, You have always kept me safe in trials;  
and now, tried as I am, today I believe.  
Lord, You have always marked the road for the coming day;  
and though it may be hidden, today I believe.  
Lord, You have always lightened this darkness of mine;  
and though the night is here, today I believe.  
Lord, You have always spoken when time was ripe;  
and though you be silent now, today I believe.  
Amen.*

#### **Thursday, November 23: 1 Peter 3:1-12**

Peter has been talking about respecting people in authority (1 Peter 2:13-25). He doesn't say these things lightly. Remember he is in an intolerant world where (1) the emperor, Nero, is viciously persecuting Christians, and (2) most people are slaves with no legal status. As Peter begins to speak to wives, husbands, and people within the church, Peter is realistic – people are not perfect! To cite the familiar slogan: *"Christians are not perfect. Just forgiven."*

Notice that Peter does not divided the church into "pastors/leaders" and "ordinary people." He sees us ALL as people called to live faithfully for Jesus.

Peter, however, wants us to be dissatisfied with our lack of perfection. Yes, we ALL fail. Yes, we ALL sin. But we can also ALL ask for forgiveness, from God and one another. We can ALL try to be more and more

like Jesus. We can ALL keep on trying to improve.

Peter's point is that our true beauty, our real value, is who we are as people of God. It's not about our appearance. In a world where people (ladies in particular) are evaluated by their body-shape by power brokers like Harvey Weinstein., we need to hear Peter's words: *"Your beauty ... is that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight"* (3:4).

He goes on to tell husbands, *"You husbands must give honor to your wives. Treat your wife with understanding as you live together. She may be weaker than you are, but she is your equal partner in God's gift of new life"* (3:7). Peter is not saying women are inferior to men. Indeed, in a culture where NO woman could be a Roman citizen, where NO woman could vote, where most women were bought and sold like cattle, where women could be physically or emotionally abused with no legal recourse, this is radical teaching. Peter is emphasizing that women are equal to men. It will take 1900 years for western culture to begin to catch up. Most countries (and Hollywood) still don't get it. All people, regardless of gender, age, ability, ethnicity have inherent value and are equal in God's Kingdom.

*"All of you,"* Peter says, *"should be of one mind. Sympathize with each other. Love each other as brothers and sisters. Be tender-hearted, and keep a humble attitude. Don't repay evil for evil. Don't retaliate with insults when people insult you. Instead, pay them back with a blessing. That is what God has called you to do, and he will bless you for it"* (3:8-9). Do you think that was easy when Christians were being tortured and killed? Peter challenges people to live that way anyway.

Living Christianly is not easy; it's just right. After all, holding on to grudges only hurts the one who holds the grudge, not the other person. Don't lose sleep, fuss, or fume over an offense: forgive – for your own mental/physical health! Abraham Lincoln once said, *"The best way to destroy an enemy is to make him a friend."* There is a lot of wisdom in Jesus' (counter-intuitive) words: *"Love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven ... If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. You are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect"* (Matthew 5:44-48). How is God challenging me?

*I call on You, O God, for You will answer me;  
give ear to me and hear my prayer.  
Show the wonder of Your great love,  
You who save by Your right hand those who take refuge in You from their foes.  
Lighten my darkness, Lord.  
Let the light of Your presence dispel the shadows of night.*

*Christ with me sleeping,  
Christ with me waking,  
Christ with me watching, each day and each night.  
Save us, Lord, while we are awake,  
guard us while we are asleep;  
that, awake, we may watch with Christ,  
and, asleep, may rest in His peace.  
God with me protecting,  
the Lord with me directing,  
the Spirit with me strengthening forever and for evermore.*

*In the name of the Father precious,  
and of the Spirit of healing;  
in the name of the Lord Jesus,  
I pray that the peace of all peace be mine this night  
in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.*

**Friday, November 24: 1 Peter 3:13-22, 4:12-19 Variety Show, 7 pm**

In the Book of Acts, Peter, John and the other followers of Jesus endure tough times. They are verbally and physically abused. They are dragged into court. They are thrown in prison. They will be executed. It is not an easy time to say you are a Christian (like the experience of Christians in many parts of the world today).

Peter probably wrote this letter in the early 60's AD. Under Nero, who became emperor in 54 AD, Christians were systematically persecuted. Nero was a nasty man. He possibly poisoned his predecessor and step-father, Claudius. He certainly executed his mother and step-siblings. When Rome burned in 64 AD, many blamed Nero himself, claiming he was simply clearing room for a new palace (the areas that burned were just where he wanted to build. Roman historian Tacitus, however, notes that Nero *"set up as the culprits and punished with the utmost refinement of cruelty those who are called Christians ... besides being put to death they were made to serve as objects of amusement: they were clad in hides of beast and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified, others set on fire to sear to illuminate the night when daylight failed."* Nero had Paul beheaded. Nero crucified Peter upside down, because Peter felt he was not worthy to die as Jesus died (this, apparently, is a much slower and more painful way to die).

We don't like to accept that we might face opposition for our faith in Jesus – let alone outright suffering. Some teachers suggest we should only expect good things if we believe in Jesus. But Peter is preparing us for the possibility that there may well be times when we pay a price to keep the faith ...

In tough times, how does Peter say we are to respond?

- *"Even if you suffer for doing what is right, God will reward you for it. So don't worry or be afraid of their threats. Instead, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life."* (3:14)
- *"If someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way."* (3:15-16)
- *"Keep your conscience clear. Then if people speak against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live because you belong to Christ. Remember, it is better to suffer for doing good, if that is what God wants, than to suffer for doing wrong!"* (3:16-17)
- *"Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. Instead, be very glad – for these trials make you partners with Christ in his suffering, so that you will have the wonderful joy of seeing his glory when it is revealed to all the world. So be happy when you are insulted for being a Christian, for then the glorious Spirit of God rests upon you."* (4:12-14)
- *"It is no shame to suffer for being a Christian. Praise God for the privilege of being called by his name!"* (4:16)
- *"If you are suffering in a manner that pleases God, keep on doing what is right, and trust your lives to the God who created you, for he will never fail you."* (4:19)

What good news is there in these passages? How can I live for Jesus, today?

*In the shadow of Your wings, I will sing Your praises, O Lord.  
The Lord is my light, my salvation; whom shall I fear?  
The Lord is the refuge of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?  
In the shadow of Your wings, I will sing Your praises, O Lord.  
One thing I ask of the Lord, one thing I seek;  
to dwell in the presence of my God,  
to gaze on Your holy place.  
In the shadow of Your wings, I will sing Your praises, O Lord.  
I believe I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.  
O wait for the Lord! Have courage and wait, wait for the Lord.  
In the shadow of Your wings, I will sing Your praises, O Lord.  
Amen*

**Saturday, November 25: 1 Peter 4:1-11**

"*The end of all things is near*"(4:7). That may seem like an odd verse to highlight today.

Peter is not really speaking about the end of the entire space-time continuum (after all, almost 2000 years have passed since Peter wrote this). He is talking about the reality that God has **already** begun the process of cosmic renewal through Jesus. People's lives are being made new through Jesus. The old sinful order of things is winding down through Jesus. A whole new world – the Kingdom of God, the church – is emerging through Jesus. Through Jesus everything is being made new. That process began at the cross, blossomed through the resurrection, and continues today. That is something to be thankful for!

In 4:1-6, Peter talks about this whole renewal process. "*The end of all things*" does come for those who put their lives in Jesus' hands and seeks to follow His ways: "*You have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do – living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry ...*" Now God is in the business of ending those evil things and making things new in us. He wants us to be the people He created us to be, free from all those sins of the past.

Peter and his friends had experienced the amazing power of the Holy Spirit. Writing about the transformation the Spirit brings, he adds: "*God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another. Do you have the gift of speaking? Then speak as though God himself were speaking through you. Do you have the gift of helping others? Do it with all the strength and energy that God supplies. Then everything you do will bring glory to God through Jesus Christ. All glory and power to him forever and ever! Amen*"(4:10-11). God gives the right gifts at the right time to do the right things. We ALL have gifts. We ALL need to use them. God can do amazing things in and through each of us as we simply use what He has given: time, talents, resources, skills, passions ...

You can make an incredible difference for God right where you are. "*Be earnest and disciplined in your prayers. Most important of all, continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins. Cheerfully share your home with those who need a meal or a place to stay*"(4:7-9).

We are ALL called to live our faith. It's not rocket science. It's not something that requires years of theological education in some ivy-covered Ivory Tower. It's not something that requires ordination. It simply requires loving Jesus and sharing that love with others. It simply requires being forgiven by Jesus and forgiving others. It simply requires being thankful, and, out of that deep sense of gratitude, being willing to live for Jesus this moment, this day. What is God saying to me?

*We believe and trust in God the Father Almighty.  
We believe and trust in Jesus Christ His Son.  
We believe and trust in the Holy Spirit.  
We believe and trust in the Three in One.  
Teach us, dear Lord, to number our days;  
that we may live wisely.  
Help us to appreciate your mercy and love,  
that we may rejoice and be glad all of our days.  
Jesus, establish the work of our hands.  
Spirit, let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us.  
Father, let nothing disturb us and nothing frighten us.  
All things are passing, but God never changes.  
May we know you, O God, personally and passionately  
because when we know You, we need nothing else.  
You, alone, are all we need and so much more.  
We pray, Your power and Your presence in our lives,  
in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen*

## Sunday, November 26: 1 Peter 5

The church is everyone. The church is for everyone. It is men and women, children and youth, babies and seniors, well-off and less well-off. Peter, like Paul and other biblical writers, makes no distinction between "clergy" and "laity" or more spiritual and less spiritual. We are ALL "one in Christ." Paul says succinctly: *"For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes. There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus. And now that you belong to Christ, you are the true children of Abraham. You are his heirs, and God's promise to Abraham belongs to you"* (Galatians 3:26-29).

We can celebrate that we are part of something much bigger, more diverse, more gifted, and more dynamic than just ourselves. We are part of a network of churches in our city, regionally, and internationally.

As a church, we are affiliated with

- 180+ other churches and camps across Western Canada (Canadian Baptists of Western Canada, [www.cbwc.ca](http://www.cbwc.ca)), including Mill Creek Camp
- Three other Canadian Baptist partners (Ontario/Quebec, Francophone, Atlantic) to do international mission and ministry (Canadian Baptist Ministries, [www.cbmin.org](http://www.cbmin.org)), including our Cuba partnership.

Together we can use the gifts God has given us. Leaders use their gifts just as others use their various skills, talents, and abilities from serving to teaching, from giving to encouraging, from helping to playing an instrument, from organizing to caring.

The qualities of character Peter sees as essential among maturing Christians, whether we are in "formal" leadership or not, are important. These are virtues Peter sees as key indicators of spiritual growth:

- Willing, eager (not grudging) service (5:2);
- Setting a godly example (5:4);
- Respecting authority/being teachable (5:5)
- Serving one another in humility (5:5)
- Being humble and teachable before God (5:6)
- Staying alert, standing firm, and being strong in your faith (5:8-9)

How are you doing on those measures? What do you need to work on? What will you do about it?

*"Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you,"* Peter says (5:7). That is a great verse to memorize! Memorize it. More difficult: practice doing it.

*God the Father, enfold us with your love;  
God the Son, surround us with your presence;  
God the Spirit, revitalise us with your power.  
Through the day  
As the sun scatters the mist at the dawning of a new day,  
So you calm our fears and anxieties if we trust you.  
You give us strength and courage to live our daily lives  
knowing you are with us and we do not walk alone.  
As the midday sun warms us,  
we feel your protecting arms around us  
and sense your loving presence.  
As the sun sinks in a kaleidoscope of colour  
you give us hope and renewal.  
Enfold, surround, revitalise us  
each day, each night, Lord.  
Amen.*

## Monday, November 27: 2 Peter 1

Who are we, as the church? What do we do? Why do we do it? In his first letter, Peter emphasized, "*You are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light*" (1 Peter 2:9). This sounds wonderful.

Living this out in a non-Christian culture and through difficult times is hard. In both 1 Peter and 2 Peter, Peter is very honest about this. As a church, how do we encourage one another? How do we help one another? How do we build up one another? How do learn and live out godly wisdom?

Peter speaks to some of the challenges in his churches (which are relevant to us, too):

1. *Some people want to make following Jesus about rules and "religion."* You work out your salvation by going through the rites and rituals. Peter says, "*By his divine power, God has given us **everything** we need for living a godly life. We have received all of this by coming to know him, the one who called us to himself by means of his marvelous glory and excellence. And because of his glory and excellence, he has given us great and precious promises*" (1:3-4). Our salvation is God's gift of grace. It's not something we earn by what we do. It's offensive but it's true: you cannot do one thing to be good enough for God: you are simply saved by God's gracious gift of life in Jesus.
2. *Some people say, "Anything goes."* They say, "*You're 'free' in Christ; you need to explore that with your peers, without any 'interference' or wisdom from older generations. There are no timeless truths; it's up to you to find your truth.*" Peter says, "*Make every effort to respond to God's promises. Supplement your faith with a generous provision of moral excellence, and moral excellence with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with patient endurance, and patient endurance with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love for everyone*" (1:5-7). Don't go wild. Grow up. Stay connected with all generations. Learn from those who have wisdom. Rejecting godly wisdom and/or the church God has given you hurts other people, hurts you, and hurts your relationship with God. In response to God's amazing love, live in ways that show love for God, other people, and your church.
3. *Others say, "Find your own spirituality, with or without Jesus."* Jesus is just one of many paths to spirituality. Peter emphasizes the distinctive truth of the good news about Jesus. Every other world religion (and take-offs on Christianity) emphasize **you earn your way** to heaven. It's all about **you**, by **your** efforts; **you** must be good enough for **you** to get to God. They appeal to **your** humanity and work ethic: **you** can get there if **you** work hard. Only Jesus teaches that none of us can never be good enough for God. Jesus comes down to our level and meets us where we are, and deals with our present and our past. Even though we do not deserve it, He saves us. This good news about Jesus is unique.

**What do we do?** We keep on teaching the good news that Jesus, and only Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. We keep on trying to live godly lives, with moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, patient endurance, godliness, brotherly affection, and love for everyone. We can do this in our own personal lives. We can do this in partnership regionally and globally.

**Why do we do it?** Because of the precious faith we have, given to us through Jesus Christ, our God and Savior. God has given us everything we need. Christ the Morning Star shines in our hearts. As God has blessed us, we want to be a blessing to others so they know this great, good news, too.

To whom can I be a blessing today?

*Be with us,  
Be with us, Lord,  
in our coming and going, guide us,  
in our living and our being, protect us,  
in our seeing and our hearing, enrich us,  
in our thinking and our speaking, inspire us,  
in our arriving and our departing, preserve us.  
Be with us, Lord,  
in our working and our resting,  
in our laughing and our crying,  
in our eating and our fasting,  
in our travelling and our staying.  
Abide with us, each day, each night.  
Amen*

## **Tuesday, November 28: 2 Peter 2**

You could create your own religion. Use Christian-sounding language, but change the message ...

- Talk about Jesus as just a good moral teacher, not God.
- Tell people they can be "gods." Either say God was once like us and we can become like Him. Or, tell people that they are already divine: they can be anything if they only think positively.
- Emphasize morality is personal. What is right to you is right for you and will bring you fulfillment.
- Use "spiritual" words (God, salvation, Spirit, spirituality, love) but redefine them.
- Make it all about **them**. What matters is **their** fulfillment; forget about caring for other people.
- Make it clear no one else ever understood truth until you. They can only trust you.

The result? If you do it well you can write bestselling books, be on TV, and become very, very wealthy.

Peter is living in a world a lot like ours: various teachers sound very spiritual, but what they are saying is simply not true. Our challenge is to see through the scams to keep the real truth.

Peter's counsel is we need to know God. We need to grow in our knowledge and wisdom of God. We need to be people who are holistic and integrated, whose faith influences every aspect of our lives. If we are consistently Christian, all the time, in all circumstances, we will not be sidetracked and deceived.

In 1 Peter 1, Peter emphasized we need an authentic personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Because of our faith, we keep on trying to live godly lives, with moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, patient endurance, godliness, brotherly affection, and love for everyone. Following Jesus is much more than a decision to simply accept Jesus as our Saviour: it is also a commitment to follow Him as Lord, to allow the Holy Spirit to actively change us. When we do that, we can discern error and truth. We have a worldview of hope. And we adopt a positive, godly lifestyle that makes a difference in the world.

Allowing this to happen involves a daily decision to allow God to work within us and through us. Deciding to believe in Jesus is only the starting line of a lifelong marathon. Every moment of every day, I must choose to allow God to form a godly character within me. He expects us to use my spiritual, mental and physical abilities to make that happen. One of the exciting and challenging principles of the New Testament is Christians need to THINK, hard, about how we apply our faith to our lives. On every issue in life we wrestle with how we ought to respond Christianly: in the Bible this is called "wisdom." It's not good enough to let other people tell us what to think. It is certainly not good enough to accept any political platform as "Christian" without seriously challenging it with biblical truth.

What are the challenges to our faith, today? What teachings/teachers tempt us to compromise the truth? How can we stay strong in our faith? What are the challenging issues we need to wrestle through?

These are things we work through personally. These are also issues we work through together. We all need each other's wisdom, insight, and experiences. We can learn from one another.

We also all need to take responsibility to mentor and help other people grow in their faith. How can we encourage other people to grow in their relationship with Jesus? In wisdom? In life?

*A God of light, you illuminate the night  
with the radiance of your presence.  
Be with those who suffer pain in the silent hours of darkness.  
Comfort the dying and those who watch with them.  
Stay the hands of those who are bent on evil deeds.  
Give refreshing rest to those who toss and turn in sleeplessness,  
and give peace to your world.  
Amen.*

### **Wednesday, November 29: 2 Peter 3**

Peter has encouraged us to realize that God lives in all of us through the Holy Spirit. Our challenge is to allow the Spirit to move in us to cultivate qualities of faith, excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness, and self-giving love. The key to living integrated spiritual lives is allowing the Holy Spirit to work in us freely, transform us completely, and help us become people who live what we believe.

Why bother living integrated spiritual lives? Because, having harmony between what we believe and how we live leads to a full, satisfying life. And, Peter tells us, Jesus will return, one day some day. We want to be prepared for that. And we want to invite other people to know Jesus and to be prepared for that.

People have been trying to figure out the exact day and time of Jesus' return since the day He ascended into heaven. But just as nobody got the timing of Jesus' first coming correct, so far the self-appointed prophets have all been incorrect forecasting Jesus' return, too.

Other people have dismissed the whole idea of Jesus' return as nonsense. If it hasn't happened yet, it isn't going to happen ever, right?

What does Peter tell us?

- That God, in His own time and His own way, will bring all things to their appropriate end and establish a new reality;
- Jesus will return to earth suddenly, personally and visibly in glory according to His promise (there are some general guidelines, but no specifics)
- The dead will be raised and everyone will be judged by Christ in righteousness; believers will dwell forever with God in heaven; unrighteous people will be judged.
- The reason for the delay is because the Lord is patient: He doesn't want any to perish. The Lord's patience, Peter says, means salvation. A long delay is a good thing.

Why do we need to know this? What difference does it make in our lives?

- It's an encouragement to keep things in perspective. We can look forward to Christ's return. For us it will be a joyful time. Throughout Scripture, Christian life on earth is pictured as a struggle: we will have different values and may suffer for our faith. But in the end it is more than worth it.
- It's an encouragement to godly living. There is a connection between what we believe and how we live: they are not separate realities. Our genuine beliefs show up in our actions, words, priorities, how we spend our time, and how we spend our money. Do we really love Jesus? Live like it!

- It's an encouragement to service. We are to look forward for the coming of the Lord, but not through pious inactivity. It means action. "*Your Kingdom come ...*" is a call to get involved!
- It's an encouragement to share our faith. We want ALL people to know Jesus and experience salvation in Him.

The Holy Spirit is in us, transforming us, and protecting us: He will return and take us to himself. That is good news.

The Spirit also gives us an invitation and challenge: He wants us to actively grow in our faith and to serve Him as the centre of our lives. The key to an integrated, fulfilling Christian life is to allow our God – Father, Son, and Spirit – to be the centre of our lives, to inspire us, to guide us, and to empower us. Will we do that? Then we have to follow through with that and actually do it: "*make every effort to be found living peaceful lives that are pure and blameless in his sight*" (3:14).

Am I living my faith? How is Jesus challenging me?

*From the rising of the sun to its setting, you guide us,  
from our birth to our death, you lead us,  
in our grief and in our sorrow, you comfort us,  
in our joy and celebration, you uplift us,  
from the beginning of our lives to their ending,  
you encompass us with love.  
A touch of glory  
Lord, touch our lives with your glory  
that we may reach out to others.  
Fill our hearts with your love  
that all may see the love of Christ.  
Inspire us to dare new things for you  
that we may encourage those without hope,  
Open our lives to your Spirit  
that we may reflect your praise.  
Amen.*

#### **Thursday, November 30: Romans 15:1-21**

I came to faith in Jesus in 1979. Back then, one of the Christian books people were talking about (and one of the first I read) was *Out of the Saltshaker and into to World: Evangelism as a Way of Life* (Becky Pippert); it's about how we can share our faith openly and honestly in our daily lives. I began fulltime ministry in the early 1990's. One of the most popular books was *Becoming a Contagious Christian* (Bill Hybels): "*communicating our faith in Christ should be the most natural thing in the world.*"

On September 27, 2017, I searched the "Best Sellers in Christian Books" on Amazon.ca. The top 20 included 13 (historical or end times) novels, 3 on personal relationships with God, 2 children's story books, and 2 books on marriage. Sharing our faith? Not even on the radar.

Does that mean our passion for evangelism is gone? Perhaps. We live in a time of an increasing "privatization" of faith: we keep our faith to ourselves and want to be "safe" in a dangerous world.

Or perhaps not. We have changed our terminology. We often use the term "missional" now. A missional church and a missional people are passionate about God's mission. What is God's mission? That all people everywhere know Him and that people in need get the help they need. We share God's love in Word (the good news about Jesus) and in deed (practical help): it's a both/and, not an either/or. That comes across loud and clear in Romans 15. Paul is missional. Paul doesn't want to be in a "Christian" nation or a "Christian community" living a safe "Christian" life.

He wants to be in a place where he can share the good news about faith in, new life in, and salvation through Jesus and help people. He wants the Kingdom of God to grow. He wants to be missional. He wants the church to be missional, caring for, loving, and sharing the good news about Jesus with everyone.

We are also missional – we want people to know Jesus (I hope!). As a church, we are incredibly active in our local community. We have people who talk about Jesus with their family, friends, and neighbours. We have our Adult Drop In; we are active in the Soup Kitchen, Food Banks, making quilts and sewing for those in need, Days for Girls, Upwards Basketball Camp, New Canadian Ministry, University/College Student ministry, Habitat for Humanity, Mill Creek Camp, Creation Care, Project Connect, L'Arche Lethbridge, Prison Chaplaincy, coaching sports teams, the Cancer Clinic, Alzheimer's Society, reading in schools, Crisis Hotline, Social Housing in Action, Youth Emergency Shelter, school councils, and many, many more.

Romans 15 reminds us that Jesus came for everyone in our community: European-background, Aboriginal, Asian, African, Middle Eastern.

Some of us lament we are no longer a "Christian" community (Canada never was officially a "Christian" nation). Paul would see this as a fantastic blessing. Without going overseas, we have the amazing privilege of sharing the good news about Jesus with people who really, really need to hear it. Paul wants *"to preach the Good News where the name of Christ has never been heard"* (15:20): I can do that simply by talking with my neighbours. I can be missional on my own street. That's awesome. It's a gift from God.

We share our faith by how we live in deed: integrity, honesty, compassion, justice, the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

We also share our faith in Word as we tell our own story about Jesus has changed our lives and invite people to know Jesus, personally, too. It can be a bit scary, but give it a go: simply tell your story (and, if you like, pick up a copy of Pippert's or Hybels' books – they are both great).

*Creator God, in the springtime of our lives,  
you give us the enthusiasm and daring of youth.  
In the summer of our lives,  
you encourage us to reach our full potential.  
In the autumn of our lives,  
you walk beside us as we reflect on years gone by  
In the winter of our lives,  
you enfold us in your love which will never let us go.  
When the seasons of our lives are past,  
you clothe us with resurrection bodies  
which will live forever.  
By my words may I show people Jesus,  
by my thoughts may I show people Jesus,  
by my actions may I show people Jesus,  
by my life may I show people Jesus.  
Amen.*

### **Friday, December 1: Romans 15:20-33**

We share our faith locally. We also remind ourselves often we are part of a global family of people who love Jesus. God has opened the door for our church to partner is with the Fraternity of Baptist Churches in Cuba. This is a small, struggling community of churches, serving God and sharing His word in a very poor country. It's a privilege to partner with them. We can bless them. They can also bless us. Following the devastation of Hurricane Irma in September, we received this email about the good and bad that has come out of dealing with the effects of Hurricane Irma and how our brothers and sisters in Christ weathered the storm:

*Dear sisters and brothers, with a little more time and new energies we write to thank you for the support and encouragement we have received as you accompany us so closely. Thank you for continuing to call, that was the only thing we could have amid the blackouts, the lack of water and the uncertainty. Thank you from the bottom of my heart on behalf of your Cuban family and myself, who make Matanzas our home.*

*It was not expected that this cyclone would affect Matanzas and it was only yesterday when they gave an account of what happened, and we saw how close it was to Varadero and our city, that we knew how close it was to us. 100% of the country's electrical system collapsed. The thermoelectric plant, the country's largest electricity generator, located on the northern coast of Matanzas, very close to the city, was totally destroyed by the impact of the sea ...*

*The neighborhood where the church and the Kairós Centre is located was not great affected. The Marina neighborhood was not flooded nor did the river San Juan overflow, both places that are very vulnerable to extreme weather. The Havana coast was more vulnerable and the floods that occurred there had never been of such magnitude.*

*The biggest problem with the facilities of the church and Kairós was with leaks and a lot of water entering the north part of the building throughout the night. Even the houses that are in the process of being donated and already in a state of deterioration were not affected. Beginning Friday afternoon, the Kairós Center served as a refuge for families and people who had problems in their homes or lived alone and were afraid of the hurricane. We were without electricity for 6 days. Although we had water in the cisterns we could not offer the purified water because of the lack of electricity. The demand for drinking water was great. In the seminary district, being on the same circuit as the children's hospital, electricity was repaired in 3 days and that was a relief for people who could get purified water there. On Wednesday afternoon electricity was restored and on Thursday we began to offer purified water. On Friday, we visited and brought lunch to the people of the Pan de Vida project. The young people who accompanied this project were early to visit their friends. None of these people had any major damage than they had before the hurricane.*

*The workers of the Center did not have great impact to their dwellings, only one of the receptionists lost many of the trees on the patio. The members of the church were not affected either. Of the 41 faith communities of the Fraternity of Baptist Churches of Cuba, 11 were affected in their facilities. Many of these are in the northern provinces.*

*This time has been and continues to be difficult. The greatest uncertainty is now in food. Not many foods are found in stores. It was announced, for example, that the egg, food that in Cuba is basic for lunches or dinners, will not be sold for free, but will keep the regulated quota of 5 eggs per person for the month. You feel a food shortage and this creates dissatisfaction and insecurity in the population. Meat cannot be found or the amount is not enough to supply the population. The prices of the few vegetables have gone up in price and the queues for the purchase of some products are long. In Havana, they have posted guards patrolling the streets for the looting of the shops that have been held since the day of the hurricane. But within the disaster that has occurred, and the food uncertainty that reminds us a little of the Special Period, there are beautiful signs of the presence of God in our midst. The night of the hurricane, among the people who stayed in Kairos, there was such a special sharing of stories, jokes, stories of life, and food that one could say that it was a small community that celebrated God that was present. For years Raimelys has worked in the Center and been a neighbour, however, we had never shared any dinner or lunch together in our homes. For those six days, we put together everything we had for dinner, cooked together in the candlelight, and talked until late at night when the immense heat could be overcome by our dream. Many young people of the city, prisoners, workers and neighbors of the different quarters, joined in the work of cleaning the streets of the rubble and fallen trees, especially in all the road of the Beach where the sea displaced half a block, a house of concrete, lots of sand and debris from the sea. Among the needs we have seen, the greatest is to be able to acquire a small electrical plant to operate the purified water system and offer potable water, when this type of phenomena happens. The demand was tremendous from the day before when we had to turn on the system 6 times. That was the last day we could serve until almost a week later. The waters after a hurricane are turbid, unfit for consumption. Authorities have to boil the water*

*and chlorinate it, but without electricity and sometimes without gas it is not possible for everyone. We believe that a generator would be a necessary contribution.*

*We send this brief chronicle of what has been lived, and we are still living, because there are places in other provinces that totally lost their homes, especially those near the sea and where it will take days to restore electricity. Once again we are moved by solidarity in the calls, messages and prayers we have had with us. We are also very saddened for the victims of the recent earthquakes in Mexico, and due to the human and material losses in the Caribbean and Florida caused by the hurricanes. Our prayers are with these dear brothers and sisters.*

*A big hug and we continue on the journey, pilgrims together, Wanda Hernández, Kairós Center*

Let's pray for our brothers and sisters in Cuba. And our brothers and sisters in Puerto Rico, and other Caribbean Islands devastated by hurricanes. And our brothers and sisters in Texas and Florida.

We are a global family of people who love Jesus and live for Jesus. Let's pray for and help one another out. Do you want to give to hurricane relief? You can do so through our overseas ministry, Canadian Baptist Ministries (online at [www.cbmin.org](http://www.cbmin.org)).

*Give me patience, Lord, to listen to your voice,  
to wait for you to act.  
Save me from impatience  
and from wanting to run ahead of your timing for me.  
Lord, may I love others as you have love me.  
Lord, help me to have more patience,  
less prone to get hurt and vexed,  
more willing to be kind and thoughtful,  
less ready to be so perplexed.  
Less harsh in my judgement of others  
to see them as children of God,  
less ready to seek to be noticed,  
more humble like Jesus, my Lord.  
Lord, may I love others as you have love me.  
Amen.*

## **Saturday, December 2: Isaiah 5**

It's December 2. We are beginning to move toward Christmas. We often refer to this season as "Advent," a Latin word mean "Coming." Advent is a time we prepare for the **coming of Jesus**, His birth, at Christmas.

Jesus' birth didn't come out of the blue. Throughout the Old Testament there are hints that God was going to send a Messiah, a Saviour. We'll look at some of those foreshadowing passages over the next few days.

Why did God need to send a Saviour at all? Why did Jesus come? Because we all need a Saviour.

For instance, God speaks to Isaiah about issues in Judah (the southern half of what was the Kingdom of Israel). Through Isaiah 1-4, God's message is that people sin (we read Isaiah 1:1-23 on October 25). People no longer love, honour, or know God. People do evil, nasty things. They lie. They take advantage of the poor and widows. They are dishonest in business. They think they're just fine. Sounds like today.

In Isaiah 5, God use a parable to get his point across. The vineyard/garden is Israel/Judah, God's people, good "religious" people (5:7). God highlights five key issues:

1. **Greed** (5:8-10) – accumulating more and more land/wealth meant others were dispossessed and left

- in poverty. The rich-poor gap was growing and real people were being really hurt.<sup>8</sup>
2. **Self-indulgence** (5:11-18) – God loves a good party for the right reasons (Isaiah 25:6, Revelation 19:7-9), but not as the end purpose of life. These folks lived for party after party after party.
  3. **Cynicism** (5:18-19) – Since these folks can't see an immediate cause-and-effect result from their sin (no instant lightning bolts from heaven) why change their ways? They think they're OK. They aren't.
  4. **Twisting the truth** (5:20-21) – truly postmodern, these folks have declared there is no such thing as good or evil; therefore there is also no such thing as sin. Do whatever you want. If it's good for you, go for it! They ignore the injustice, pain, and suffering their selfishness causes.
  5. **Social injustice** (5:22-24) – these people mix a mean martini, but ignore the suffering around them. They honour those who can hold the most booze, not those who most bless the poor.

Sound familiar? We live in a time when the rich-poor gap is growing, where many people exist weekend party to weekend party, when people deny the existence of God or truth, when we are encouraged to do what is best only for ourselves, when we pay athletes and entertainers outrageous salaries to amuse us ... while people sleep in makeshift camps in the coulees and die of starvation in refugee camps.

Is God real?

- **If God is NOT real**, then the Judeans had it right – eat, drink, and be merry (and accumulate as much as you possibly can) ... for tomorrow we die. Period. End of story.
- **If God IS real**, then we see the world differently and we live very differently.
  - We ask ourselves what His will is AND we do it (1 and 2 Peter). God has established basic principles of right and wrong. They work. So live it!
  - We recognize that God has a real heart for the suffering and poor AND we try to do something about it. Money may be God's gift to us, but He gives it to us as stewards. It's not "mine," but "God's," entrusted to me to use wisely, to bless all people.
  - We realize that life here is not all there is. If it is difficult and a struggle at time, that's OK. Death is not the end, but the doorway to the Kingdom of God in all its fullness (2:1-5)

Do any of these five problems resonate with me? Why? Bring them to God.

We need a Saviour who can forgive us. We need a Lord who can empower us to live as we ought to live. We need Jesus. Confess you sin. Talk with God about your struggles. Thank Him for Jesus.

*In the rising and the setting of the sun, may we praise you.  
 In the waxing and the waning of the moon, may we praise you.  
 In the ebbing and the flowing of the tide, may we praise you,  
 In the beginning and the ending of our lives, may we praise you.*

*As I travel the road of life,  
 Shepherd-King walk beside me.  
 As I fall into pot-holes,  
 Shepherd-King raise me.  
 As I balk at the rough places,  
 Shepherd-King encourage me.  
 As I wander away from you,  
 Shepherd-King lead me.  
 As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
 Shepherd-King surround me.  
 Amen.*

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<sup>8</sup> In the Old Testament covenant, all land and all property was understood to be God's. God grants His people the privilege of using it and enjoying its fruits, but all people should share in this bounty. We are stewards; God is the owner. What is "ours" in not really "ours" at all, it is God's. Therefore, when God calls us to be generous, He is asking us simply to share what He has entrusted to us.

### Sunday, December 3: Isaiah 6

What is Advent? Why do we celebrate it? Advent is about Jesus/God coming into our world. Advent is about the good news to share that God loves His creation and sent His son, Jesus, to save us and give us new life.

Isaiah "*saw the Lord.*" In the Old Testament, no one sees the Lord and lives. God is so holy, so pure, so righteous (and we're not) that anyone who sees God dies. Isaiah is sure he's done for. Instead, God cleanses Isaiah. He forgives Isaiah. Isaiah is made as holy, pure, and righteous as God. Isaiah does nothing. God, in His grace, takes away all of Isaiah's uncleanness and gives him a new beginning.

This is what God, in Jesus, does for each one of us. Through His death and resurrection, we are made as holy, pure, and righteous as Him. We do nothing. But God, in His grace, takes away all of our uncleanness and gives us new life. The process may hurt. God burns away the sin. We must change. But it's worth it.

God is looking for people who will be His people. God is looking for people who will seek to live this purified, godly life. Of course, every person, including Isaiah, is still going to be imperfect. We will still make mistakes. We will still sin. But we choose to aim for that life of holiness ...

Theologian David Wells writes, "*Holiness is not a matter of people simply cleaning up their lives on the outside, becoming civil as a matter of politeness only, or going along with biblical teaching because others are doing so. This is not biblical holiness. This is, at best, social niceness.*"

*"Biblical holiness begins with the Holy (as Isaiah discovered!). But the Holy, by its very nature, can be approached only when we come as sinners. He is never accessible to us as consumers. We come in sackcloth and ashes, not as buyers. Indeed, we cannot approach the Holy at all on our own terms. We must see that the Holy has first approached us in Christ and, through Him, reconciled us to himself. The revelation of the Holy would be unbearable were we to see it in any other way than from within Christ. In Christ, what we are seeing is God's holiness in its action on our sin. Without Christ we have to bear that judgment in ourselves. What we see instead is holiness coming down in grace and, in Christ, going forth against our sin in triumph.*"

*"Holiness is so much more than just a moral code or a set of rules. It is all about what is right because it is all about what God is in his utterly pure being. It is his being in its burning purity that drives us in pursuit of what is right. And he has disclosed to us in Scripture, in a multitude of ways, what is right and true."*

This is also a missional passage. Our God is an awesome God! He is Creator. He is King. He is holy. He is more than capable of handling all the world's problems – and ours, too. Our Father invites us to be ambassadors, sharing this good news with the world. Advent is a great time to invite people to find the reason for the season: to meet Jesus. How can we encourage people to see Jesus in the coming weeks? When times get tough, who do you turn to? Who do you trust? Who do you go to for help?

*From the rising of the sun to its setting, you guide us,  
from our birth to our death you lead us,  
in our grief and in our sorrow, you comfort us,  
in our joy and celebration, you uplift us,  
from the beginning of our lives to their ending, you encompass us with love.  
Lord, touch our lives with your glory that we may reach out to others.  
Fill our hearts with your love that all may see the love of Christ.  
Inspire us to dare new things for you that we may encourage those without hope,  
Open our lives to your Spirit that we may reflect your praise.  
From the tangle of our lives, you can weave the perfect tapestry  
of our joys and sorrows, our successes and failures,  
our achievements and unfulfilled dreams.  
Amen*