



October 2022

What the Spirit says to the Churches 2

**Readings, Reflections, Prayers
about following Jesus
in Revelation 1-3**

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Photo: Pergamum (Bergama), Turkiye

Monday, October 10: Acts 19:1-7 (Ephesus)

The church in Ephesus got off to a sputtering start. Very few people came to faith from Paul's initial visit, his friends who stayed behind (18:19), or Apollos' enthusiastic preaching. Such a mediocre start is encouraging to me – it's not all "success." Despite Priscilla and Aquila straightening Apollos out, the new believers in Ephesus only knew about John's baptism, the need to confess and repent of our sin. They didn't yet understand the blessing of forgiveness and new life that comes through Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

What is the good news? What is the "gospel"? Sometimes it is presented like this: simply repent for your sins: *"Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner, and I ask for Your forgiveness. I believe You died for my sins and rose from the dead. I turn from my sins and invite You to come into my heart and life. Amen."* This is a fine prayer. It's good to pray it. But many people pray it almost superstitiously: if you pray the right words, you're saved. If you get it wrong ... well, you're in trouble. Interestingly, there is no prayer like this in the Bible. Jesus never instructs us to pray this prayer. No one in Scripture who chooses to follow Jesus prays a prayer like this (look and see). In fact, this prayer is simply "John's baptism" – confession and repentance. It's not well-rounded Christian theology. There's nothing about new life with Jesus.

Instead, in the New Testament, people *"believe in Jesus"* (Acts 19:4 – see also John 3:16, 6:29-35, 11:23, 20:31; Acts 11:17, 16:31; Romans 3:22-26, 10:1-10; 1 John 3:23, 5:1). *"Believing in Jesus"* in Scripture is a lot more than just believing *"He died for my sin and rose from the dead"* – although that's (a critical) part of it. *"Believing in Jesus"* involves a wholesale devotion to Jesus that's about far more than just confession and repentance. The Biblical understanding of *"believing in Jesus"* includes a whole "new birth" and "new life" in Jesus that is far more than just repenting from sin (John 3:1-18). We follow Jesus in all ways. David Gushee writes, *"Anyone can, and most Americans do, 'believe' in Jesus rather than some alternative savior. Anyone can, and many Americans sometimes do, say a prayer asking Jesus to save them. But not many embark on a life fully devoted to the love of God, the love of neighbor, the moral practice of God's will, and radical, costly discipleship."* This is what Paul wants the Ephesians to understand.

"Believing in Jesus" includes following the Holy Spirit's leading, guiding, encouraging, empowering, correcting, teaching, and transforming (read Ephesians 4-6). Ultimately the Spirit is the One who informs, forms, and transforms us so we become more and more like Jesus in our thinking and in our living.

Paul calls the people in Ephesus to more than an altar call. They had already confessed their sin. They had prayed a prayer. That's good. But it's only a starting point. If the sinner's prayer were enough, John the Baptist would have been enough of a prophet for Israel (he invited people to repentance). But God sent a Messiah, Jesus, who is greater than John.

Confession is a starting point for a person who believes in Jesus, the Saviour. Jesus does want us to pray for forgiveness BUT also He wants to give us new life. He wants us to be born again – with new hearts, minds, and souls – so we live new lives. He wants us to follow a new path: *"If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it"* (Matthew 16:24-25).

When Paul writes to the followers of Jesus in Ephesus, he says, *"Since you have heard about Jesus and have learned the truth that comes from him, throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life, which is corrupted by lust and deception. Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature, created to be like God – truly righteous and holy"* (Ephesians 4:21-24). He then goes on to talk in nitty gritty detail about what that looks like (4:25-6:18). The Spirit transforms us, inside and out, so we live out our faith.

- Have I made that kind of a commitment to God? Do I really believe in Jesus?
- Have I given myself heart, soul, mind, and strength to Him? Do I seek to follow Him, in all things?

*Forgive them all, Lord:
 our sins of omission and our sins of commission,
 the sins of our youth,
 and the sins of our riper years,
 the sins of our souls and the sins of our bodies,
 our secret and our more open sins,
 our sins of ignorance and surprise,
 and our more deliberate and presumptuous sins.
 Forgive the sins we have done to please ourselves
 and the sins we have done to please others,
 the sins we know and remember,
 and the sins we have forgotten.
 Forgive the sins we have tried to hide from others
 and the sins by which we have made others offend.
 Forgive them, Lord, forgive them all
 for the sake of the one who died for our sins,
 rose for our justification,
 and now stands at your right hand to make intercession for us,
 Jesus Christ, our Saviour.
 Amen.*

John Wesley (1707-1788)

Tuesday, October 11: Acts 19:8-20 (Ephesus)

Power. The great capital cities of the world are built to impress visiting dignitaries by demonstrating power and inspiring awe. The Houses of Parliament in London, the Capitol in Washington, the Kremlin in Moscow (even the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa and Legislative Buildings in Edmonton) are designed to impress us with a sense of power, strength, even wonder, and awe.

Ephesus is a city of power. It is the capital of Roman Asia, second only to Rome in size and grandeur. It is home to one of the wonders of the ancient world, the Temple of Artemis. Antipater of Sidon, who compiled the list of the Seven Wonders, describes the temple: *"I have set eyes on the wall of lofty Babylon on which is a road for chariots, and the statue of Zeus by the Alpheus, and the hanging gardens, and the colossus of the Sun, and the huge labour of the high pyramids, and the vast tomb of Mausolus; but when I saw the house of Artemis that mounted to the clouds, those other marvels lost their brilliancy, and I said, 'Lo, apart from Olympus, the Sun never looked on aught so grand.'"* By ancient standards it was huge: almost 140 m long, 70 m wide and 20 m high, with more than 127 gleaming marble columns.

When Paul speaks and preaches about Jesus in Ephesus, people notice. There is a lot about **power** in this reading – not political power, but spiritual power. The events taking place in Ephesus are summarized by Luke (author of Acts) this way: *"the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in **power**"* (19:20). We'll see tomorrow that people associated with the Temple of Artemis are not happy about this new power in town.

The Apostle John, who lived in Ephesus for many years (and may be buried there), writes to his friends about the spiritual battles we can face: *"Dear friends, do not believe everyone who claims to speak by the Spirit. You must test them to see if the spirit they have comes from God. For there are many false prophets in the world. This is how we know if they have the Spirit of God: If a person claiming to be a prophet acknowledges that Jesus Christ came in a real body, that person has the Spirit of God. But if someone claims to be a prophet and does not acknowledge the truth about Jesus, that person is not from God. Such a person has the spirit of the Antichrist, which you heard is coming into the world and indeed is already here. But you belong to God, my dear children. You have already won a victory over those people, because **the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world**"* (1 John 4:1-4).

Isn't it great to know that the Holy Spirit, in us, is greater than the spirit who is in the world? We may be tempted to think that, as the people of God, we are powerless. Global politics, national politics, provincial

politics, even local politics seem out of our control. Some political leaders are obsessed with gaining, wielding, and holding on to power. But their power is only temporary and transitory. The only **real power** in the universe is God. As one person – you – allows the Spirit to inform, form, and transform you, the world around you is transformed a little bit, too. The world is changed more for good through ordinary people, like you and me, than through the political or business “power-players” out there.

We want change, BIG change, right now. But genuine change – transformative change – happens when hearts are changed. Real change comes as the Spirit comes into our lives and flows through us. That takes time. Person-to-person change happens slowly. How can you make a little change in your world, today?

*Blessed Lord,
who has caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:
grant that we may in such wise hear them,
read them,
mark them,
learn from them,
and inwardly digest them.
By patience and the comfort of your holy Word,
May we embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Saviour, Jesus Christ.
Amen.*

Book of Common Prayer

Wednesday, October 12: Acts 19:21-20:1 (Ephesus)

In 1994, Andres Escobar was shot 12 times by three men. According to witnesses, one assassin shouted, “Thanks for the own goal.” Escobar, a defender for the Columbia national soccer team, had scored an own goal in the World Cup, leading to Columbia’s elimination. Columbians take their soccer seriously. Many people around the world take their soccer seriously. You really don’t want to be an Italy fan in Wembley Stadium (London). England fans are banned (or “caged” in fenced-off sections) at some European venues ...

The theatre in Ephesus is crammed with 30,000+ people. They are as rabid as any Columbia or England soccer fan. This theatre is used for concerts, plays, religious, political and philosophical discussions, and for gladiator and animal combat. Here, bloodshed is normal. In fact, it is good entertainment. They are chanting the home team cheer over and over: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians.” “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians.” “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians.” They smell blood. And a good show.

What’s happening this day is bigger than a soccer game. Thanks to the incendiary remarks of Demetrius, people believe their city’s heart is under attack. They believe Paul, Gaius, Aristarchus, and Alexander, by insulting Artemis, are destroying the soul of their proud city. Perhaps more importantly, they see Paul and the others undermining the economy: the Temple of Artemis is a place of pilgrimage for tens of thousands of people eager to stay in hostels, eat and drink in local pubs, buy souvenirs, and visit brothels. If anything threatens jobs and the economy, it must be bad, right? Making money matters most, right? Jobs at all costs, right? How often do leaders use the spectre of impending economic disaster to sway our opinions?

The city clerk – a non-Christian – saves the day with good solid logic and common sense (at least someone stays rational in the insanity of the moment).

Paul, writing to people in Ephesus, later, concludes his letter: “A final word: Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on all of God’s armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places.

“Therefore, put on every piece of God’s armor so you will be able to resist the enemy in the time of evil.

Then after the battle you will still be standing firm. Stand your ground, putting on the belt of truth and the body armor of God's righteousness. For shoes, put on the peace that comes from the Good News so that you will be fully prepared. In addition to all of these, hold up the shield of faith to stop the fiery arrows of the devil. Put on salvation as your helmet, and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

"Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere" (Ephesians 6:10-18).

Most likely, none of us will face murderous devotees of Artemis. However, we will all face challenges and stresses of one sort or another. How do Paul's words in Ephesians 6 encourage us in tough times?

*Lord, help us not to forget that we are in a battle with enemies in the heavenly places.
We don't wage war with human weapons but with the weapons of the Spirit.
Let us put on the armor of light,
depending on your mighty power to make the enemy flee from us.
We thank you that you have given us this strength through the precious blood of the Lamb.
In the powerful name of Jesus
we can overcome all spiritual opposition.
We have your promise that, if we resist the devil, he will flee from us.
Keep us from opening ourselves to his influence by allowing temptation to turn into sin.
Help us to repent of any sinful habits that create strongholds for the enemy.
Help us to be faithful and obedient to you, and you alone.
May we examine our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit.
Amen.*

James S. Bell Jr.

Thursday, October 13: Revelation 2:1-7, Ephesians 1:15-23 (Ephesus)

We have read Paul's experiences in Ephesus from the book of Acts (remember the big riot, yesterday)?

As we reread Jesus' letter to the church (Revelation 2:1-7), notice how relevant His words are. The believers in Ephesus are in tough against vicious opposition. But they are keeping the faith. Yes, they need to remember their first love – they need to love God with all their hearts, minds, souls, and strength, AND love their neighbours as themselves. But they are hanging in there for Jesus in a challenging city.

Paul writes to these same followers of Jesus in Ephesus, *"I have heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people. So I never stop being grateful for you, as I mention you in my prayers. I ask the glorious Father and God of our Lord Jesus Christ to give you his Spirit. The Spirit will make you wise and let you understand what it means to know God. My prayer is that light will flood your hearts and you will understand the hope given to you when God chose you. Then you will discover the glorious blessings that will be yours together with all God's people.*

"I want you to know about the great and mighty power that God has for us followers. It is the same wonderful power he used when he raised Christ from death and let him sit at his right side in heaven. There Christ rules over all forces, authorities, powers, and rulers. He rules over all beings in this world and will rule in the future world as well. God has put all things under the power of Christ, and for the good of the church he has made him the head of everything. The church is the body of Christ and is filled with Christ who completely fills everything" (Ephesians 1:15-23).

That power is within us – the power of God Himself – to get us through all things. Whatever you are facing today, bring it to God... *"Be careful how you live. Don't live like fools, but like those who are wise. Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days. Don't act thoughtlessly, but understand what the Lord wants you to do. Don't be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit ... And give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 5:15-20).*

*Almighty and most merciful Father,
 in you we live and move and have our being.
 From you we have received tender mercy and compassion.
 To you we owe our safety in days past,
 together with all the comforts of this present life,
 and hope of the life to come.
 Daily you pour out your good gifts upon us.
 We praise you, O God, our Creator.*

*We humbly pray that Jesus, our Lord, the hope of glory,
 may be more fully formed in us.
 May we daily grow in humility, love, peace,
 patience, contentment, joy,
 and absolute surrender of our whole lives
 – body, soul, and spirit –
 to your will and pleasure.*

*Do not leave us or forsake us, but lead us safely
 through all the changes of this present world, with an unchanging love for you,
 and with a holy peace of mind which comes from an assurance of your steadfast love for us.
 May we come at last to see you face-to-face, be with you where you are,
 behold your glory, and worship you forever.
 Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.*

Simon Patrick (1626-1707)

Friday, October 14: Acts 20:13-38 (Ephesus)

Paul left Ephesus and travelled to Macedonia (Greece) and other towns in Asia (Acts 20:1-12). He is now en route to Jerusalem. He senses an impending showdown with Jewish leaders and Roman authorities. As we've seen, Paul is not afraid to suffer for his faith. Honestly, I would struggle to be as courageous as Paul.

Paul can't get away from the Ephesians. They travel 80 kms – a long way in those days – to meet with Paul. This is the **only** speech in Acts directed to a **Christian** audience (all the rest are evangelistic messages to non-believers or courtroom defense speeches). Note what Paul says to followers of Jesus (people like us):

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

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

Pray that God would give us a bigger vision of what it means that His Kingdom and His will is done on earth as it is in heaven. How can you live for Jesus, today?

*Lord, we thank you for this place in which we dwell;
 for the love that unites us;
 for the peace accorded us this day;
 for the hope with which we expect the morrow;
 for the health, the work, the food, and the bright skies,
 that make our lives delightful;
 and for our friends in all parts of the earth.*

*Purge out of every heart the lurking grudge.
 Give us grace and strength to forbear and to persevere.
 Give us the grace to accept and to forgive offenders.
 Forgetful ourselves,
 help us to bear cheerfully the forgetfulness of others.
 Give us courage, joy, and peaceful hearts.
 Spare to us our friends.
 Soften to us our enemies.*

*Bless us, if it may be, in all our innocent endeavors.
 If it may not, give us the strength to encounter that which is to come.
 May we be brave in peril,
 constant in tribulation,
 temperate in wrath,
 and in all changes of fortune.
 May we be bold, down to the gates of death,
 loyal and loving one to another,
 surrounded always by your great love.
 Amen.*

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894)

Saturday, October 15: Revelation 2:8-11 (Smyrna)

The second church Jesus addresses in Revelation 2 is in Smyrna. With a deep, sheltered harbour, Smyrna rivaled Ephesus as a major commercial city in Asia. Situated on this wonderful bay, Smyrna was unrivalled in natural beauty. It was also unrivalled by any other city in its loyalty to Rome. Today, Smyrna (now named Izmir) is a city of 3 million (similar to Toronto). Today, Ephesus is an unpopulated ruin (the nearest town, Selçuk, is only the size of Okotoks, about 30,000 people).

In the First Century, Roman emperors insisted that everyone worship them as gods. They built temples to themselves in every major town, including Smyrna. Every loyal subject was required to offer incense to the emperor's image, saying, "*Caesar is my Lord.*" Followers of Jesus refused. Jesus was their Lord. In ultra-loyal-to-Rome Smyrna, that refusal had serious consequences. Christians suffered brutal persecution. But they kept living their faith. And they kept looking outward, sharing God's good news with others.

Jewish leaders in Smyrna, wanting to rid the world of Jesus's followers, accused Christians of atrocities and disloyalty (a "*synagogue of Satan?*" (2:9)). The Romans persecuted the church. In 2:10, "*suffering in prison for ten days*" refers to people waiting to die in the arena by gladiators, wild animals, burning, or worse. For instance, within a few decades of this letter, the aged Christian bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, would be arrested for his Christian faith. The Roman proconsul took pity on the old man and urged him simply to say, "*Caesar is my Lord.*" If Polycarp would make this declaration and offer a small pinch of incense to Caesar's image, he would escape torture and death. Polycarp is recorded as responding: "*Eighty and six years I have served Him, and He has done me no wrong.*" Polycarp went on to say: "*How then can I blaspheme my King and Savior? You threaten me with a fire that burns for a season, and after a little while is quenched; but you are ignorant of the fire of everlasting punishment that is prepared for the wicked.*"

Polycarp was burned alive at the stake, then stabbed with a spear when the fire failed to consume his body.

According to reports, some Jews even broke the Sabbath rules about no work on the Sabbath, to help gather fuel for his execution. Smyrna was a tough town.

At his execution, Polycarp is recorded as praying: *"I bless you, Father, for judging me worthy of this hour, so that in the company of the martyrs I may share the cup of Christ."* Could you have prayed like that?

As long as we, Christians, are lukewarm in our faith, we can probably find enough ethical wiggle-room to thrive. But if we really commit to live for Jesus and to live like Jesus, by His ethics and values – and if we speak up and share the good news Jesus has brought in our lives – we can expect some difficulties. Let's be honest: following Jesus can be tough. Not as difficult as Smyrna in the 1st Century, but still challenging.

HOWEVER, Jesus emphasizes, *"Don't be afraid ... remain faithful ..."* (2:10).

- Be encouraged. God is in control. Bad things happen, but within limits (2:10). He who is in us is greater than he (Satan) who is in the world ([1 John 4:4](#)).
- Be encouraged. God is all-knowing. He reminds us, *"I know your afflictions"* (2:9). He meets us in the specific circumstances of each of our lives, bringing the right help, healing, and hope we need.
- Be encouraged. God is purposeful. When Paul writes, *"in all things God works for the good of those who love him,"* he is NOT saying God causes all things, but God can bring blessing out of all circumstances, even the hard times (Romans 8:28).
- Be encouraged. God has overcome everything, even death itself (2:8). Jesus says, *"Don't be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the living one. I died, but look – I am alive forever and ever. And I hold the keys of death and the grave"* (1:17-18). For all eternity, we are safe in His hands.

*O Father of your well-beloved and blessed Son, Jesus Christ,
O God of the angels and powers and of every living creature,
O Saviour of all righteous people which live in your presence,
I thank you that you have graciously provided
to allot me a portion among the number of martyrs.
Thank you that I am among the people of Christ
Who will inherit the resurrection of eternal life,
both of body and soul,
in the incorruption of the Holy Spirit.
Among them I will be received in your sight this day
as a fruitful and acceptable sacrifice,
you have already prepared and now fulfilled.
You are the most faithful God who keeps his promises.
For all these things I praise you,
I bless you, I glorify you;
through the eternal High Priest, Jesus Christ,
your well-beloved Son,
to whom with you and the Holy Spirit, be all glory,
now and forever.
Amen.*

Polycarp (69-156 AD)

Sunday, October 16: Revelation 2:8-11 (Smyrna)

As we reread Jesus' letter to His people in Smyrna, it's helpful to know that, although Smyrna was one of the wealthiest cities in the ancient world, Christians in Smyrna suffered dire poverty. Poverty went hand in hand with their faith. Many Christians were slaves (they were poor by definition). Some of Jesus' followers may have given self-sacrificially to help others. Some believers' homes may have been ransacked. Some may have missed opportunities to get jobs, contracts, or promotions by refusing to worship the emperor.

The author of Hebrews comments to his readers, *"Think back on those early days when you first learned about Christ. Remember how you remained faithful even though it meant terrible suffering. Sometimes you were exposed to public ridicule and were beaten, and sometimes you helped others who were suffering the same things. You suffered along with those who were thrown into jail, and when all you owned was taken from you, you accepted it with joy. You knew there were better things waiting for you that will last forever"* (Hebrews 10:32-34). That probably described Smyrna well.

None of us can relate to the suffering of the early Christians. However, it still may not pay well to follow Jesus – in finances, prestige, or status. As God's people, we are called to balanced lives, giving time to our families and to God (a quality of life emphasizing the importance of relationships and non-material things). We are called to standards of honesty and integrity that may cause us to miss some sketchy profits and forego some iffy business opportunities. We give tithes and offerings to God to build the Kingdom of God and help others. God honors those who give the first fruits of their labor with a thankful heart.

Jesus' message to His church is that those of us who live our faith, with integrity and generous hearts, are not poor at all. While we may not have huge portfolios, we may, in fact, be the richest people on earth. Our wealth may not be a bursting bank account, but the life, love, joy, peace, and contentment Jesus brings. Our riches will be relationships with God and with other people.

This is the season of the year when we give thanks. We all have so much for which to be thankful. We are thankful that He loved us so much He gave us Jesus, who died on the cross that we might be forgiven. We are thankful for His gift of forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life (now and hereafter). We are thankful for His Spirit within us. We are thankful for the amazing creation God surrounds us with. These are **BIG** things about which we can be thankful.

On a year-by-year, month-by-month, day-by-day basis we have so much to be grateful for as well. We are thankful for our health, family, country, daily bread, friends, job, health care, homes, pensions, educational opportunities, church, freedom, clothing, city, transportation, security, ability to hear, savings account, schools, recreation opportunities, ability to see, emergency services, life experiences, and so much more ...

"Give thanks, with a grateful heart ..." Give thanks, with more than just nice words. How can you give back to God – heart, mind, soul, and body?

*Sweet Saviour Christ,
in your undeserved love for us you were prepared to suffer the painful death of the cross.
Let me not be cold or even lukewarm in my love for you.
Lord, help me to face the truth about myself.
Help me to hear my words as others hear them,
to see my face as others see me.
Let me be honest enough to recognize my impatience and conceit.
Let me recognize my anger and selfishness.
Give me sufficient humility to accept my own weaknesses for what they are.
Give me the grace – at least in your presence –
to say, "I was wrong – forgive me."
God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
increase in us faith and truth and gentleness.
Amen.*

Polycarp (69-156 AD)

Monday, October 17: Philippians 3:1-14 (Smyrna)

When we lived in Edmonton in the 1990's, signs welcoming you to the city announced you were now entering "Edmonton: The City of Champions." Still basking in the afterglow of several Grey Cups and Stanley Cups (remember Wayne Gretzky, Paul Coffey, Mark Messier, and crew?), Edmonton had a certain

sporting swagger. In 2015, after a mediocre run of many not-so glorious seasons, the signs were quietly changed. Now you're welcomed to "The City of Edmonton: Alberta's Capital City."

Smyrna was famous for its games and athletes. Smyrna was the "City of Champions" in the Roman province of Asia (now Turkiye). At the end of each competition, the successful athlete, who endured to the end and was victorious, was "crowned" with a laurel wreath.

Notice what Jesus says to His people in Smyrna: *"Don't be afraid of what you are about to suffer. The devil will throw some of you into prison to test you. You will suffer for ten days. But if you remain faithful even when facing death, I will give you the crown of life"* (Revelation 2:10)

Paul, in his letter to believers in Philippi, encourages us to keep the faith as well. Like Jesus' words to His people in Smyrna, Paul encourages us to keep our eyes on Jesus: *"I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us"* (Philippians 3:13-14).

Paul warns us that

- It's a long, hard race. Many distractions can take our eyes off God and His grace. What kinds of things? Will the cares of this life lead us from Jesus?
- There may be times of suffering and hardship. Will we "hit the wall" and give up? Will we keep the faith, despite the challenges, and finish well?
- It's tempting to give up, look back, and rest on our laurels. Paul challenges us to keep looking ahead. There are still opportunities. God hasn't given up on us. Don't give up on God.

What is God saying to you?

*Jesus, I am doubtful,
but you trusted your heavenly Father to the very point of dying for him.
Lord, I am selfish,
but you are all about serving others in the name of your Father.
When it comes to temptation,
I am weak, but you were a perfect picture of strength when the devil came to tempt you.
I am prone to anger when I feel someone is misjudging me,
but you were our example of "turning the other cheek."
I take everything I have for granted,
but you gave the glory to your heavenly Father in all things.
I forget to give thanks and praise you,
but You took time to pray and thank your Father.
In all these things and others, Lord, make me more and more like you every day.
Amen.*

based on Tracy Macon Sumner

Tuesday, October 18: 1 Peter 1:1-12 (Smyrna)

As we read these letters to early churches in Revelation 2-3, we can think about questions like: Who are we as a church? What do we do? Why do we do it?

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: like the faithful in Smyrna, they were poor, slaves, displaced people, Jewish migrants, and other people with no legal or social status. They were outsiders/foreigners. They had no citizenship. Only **men** born to Roman citizen parents (ethnic Romans) were legally Roman citizens. By the time of Jesus, a very wealthy non-ethnic Roman could purchase Roman citizenship. Or citizenship could be granted to a non-citizen for exceptional service to the Emperor. Thus, only a very, very small minority of people (all **men**) in the Roman Empire were actually citizens. 99.9% were nobodies.

Peter reminds followers of Jesus that, because of God's gift of life 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.

In Canada in 2022, we cannot appreciate how horrible it would be to have no citizenship, no rights, no value, no identity the way most people in the 1st Century did. As a result, 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 equal, ALL one, ALL full citizens in the Kingdom of God**. There are not first-class citizens and second-class citizens. Some citizens are not "more special" or "less special" because of our 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. We are all "a Kingdom of priests for God" (Revelation 1:6, 5:10). As citizens/priests 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?

*This morning, as I kindle the fire upon my hearth,
I pray that the flame of God's love may burn in my heart, and in the hearts of all I meet today.
I pray that no envy or malice, hatred or fear may smother the flame.
I pray that indifference and apathy, contempt and pride,
may not pour like cold water on the fire.
Instead, may the spark of God's love light the love in my heart,
that it may burn brightly through the day.
And may I warm those that are lonely, whose hearts are cold and lifeless,
so that all may know the comfort of God's love.
Burn in me, glorious Father;
burn in me, beautiful Jesus;
burn in me, Holy Spirit of power.
Amen.*

Celtic prayer

Wednesday, October 19: 1 Peter 1:13-2:3 (Smyrna)

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 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 Him (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 now and forever (1:23).

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

Notice there are no "extra special" people who receive a special blessing. Or people who get less. We ALL receive ALL God's love, grace, mercy, hope, and life 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 our old ways of living to satisfy our 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. In fact, we are ALL called to the highest principles. Because we ALL are saved by Jesus, we are ALL blessed with His Spirit, and we are ALL His priests, we are ALL called to live for Him. What is the Spirit saying to me?

*Lord God who is all in all to me,
Life of my life and Spirit of my spirit,
have mercy on me and fill me with your Holy Spirit.
Fill me with love that there may be no room for anything else in my heart.
I ask not for any blessing, but for you,
who is the giver of all blessings and of all life.
I ask not for the world and its pomp and glory, nor for heaven,
but I need you yourself, for where you are, there is heaven.
In you alone is satisfaction and abundance for my heart;
you yourself, my Creator, have created my heart for yourself, and not for any other created thing.
Therefore, my heart cannot find rest in anything but you.
So now take out of this heart whatever is opposed to you
and abide and rule in it yourself.
Amen.*

Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929)

Thursday, October 20: 1 Peter 2:4-12 (Smyrna)

Who are we? Back on October 4, 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 as well: they are counting on you. You also 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 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 do we do? *"What's more, you are his holy priests"* (1 Peter 2:5). Priests do two things: they bring God's love and truth **to people**, AND they bring 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 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 spiritual Temple built out of people like us. We tend to read 1 Peter 2 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. 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?

*Come, Lord Jesus, and remain in my heart.
Help me trust in you.
How grateful I am to realize that the answer to my prayer
does not depend on me at all.
As I quietly remain in you and let your life flow in me,
what freedom it is to know that the Father does not see
my frayed patience or insufficient trust,
rather only your patience, Lord,
and your confidence that the Father has everything in hand.
In faith, I thank you right now for a more glorious answer to my prayer than I can imagine.
I trust in you. Amen*

Catherine Marshall (1914-1983)

Friday, October 21: 1 Peter 2:11-25 (Smyrna)

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 (like the Smyrnans). 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, even if this leads to suffering and persecution. 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, the Smyrna believers – and other Christians – are being brutally persecuted by Caesar (in Peter's case, Nero). How can he say this? How can I respect the government even when I disagree with them? What does that look like?
- *"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 firsthand 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.

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

*Lord Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, our Salvation:
we praise you and we give you thanks.
Though we are unworthy to be your guests,
though we cannot offer to you a fitting devotion,
may your loving kindness supply for our weakness.
Before you, Lord our God, all our desires are known,
and whatsoever our heart rightly wills is a result of your grace.
Grant that we may attain a genuine love of you.
Don't let your grace be unfruitful in us, Lord.
Perfect that which you have started.
Give that which you have made us to long for.
Convert our lukewarm-ness to a burning love of you,
for the glory of your holy name.
Amen*

Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109)

Saturday, October 22: Revelation 2:12-17 and Ephesians 4:1-6 (Pergamum)

The first mark of a person (and a church) who follows Jesus is **love** (Ephesus, 2:1-7). Love for God and for others may result in **suffering** (as in Smyrna, 2:8-11), because the church stands for **truth** (2:12-17). In Pergamum the issue is truth.

Pergamum was smaller than either Ephesus or Smyrna. However, it was the political capital of Roman Asia. It was also famous for its spectacular altar of Zeus, its temples to Asclepius (the god of healing), Athena (goddess of civilization and war), Dionysius (god of wine and parties), and Roman emperors (as in Smyrna, loyal subjects had to offer incense to the emperor's statue and say, "Caesar is my Lord"). Good Pergamites, who wanted to be part of society, develop their social-economic networks, and get ahead in business, would participate in banquets and sacrifices associated with the various temples.

The church in Pergamum is praised: *"These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword ... (The sword is a symbol for truth – the Word of God [Ephesians 6:17]; 'The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart' [Hebrews 4:12]). Jesus says, 'I know where you live – where Satan has his throne (referring to all the temples and religious activity in the city). Yet you remain true to my **name**. You did not renounce your faith.'*" These folks maintained their true beliefs.

What are true beliefs? This letter (and the letter to Thyatira, next week) highlight there are essentials and non-essentials, core Christian beliefs and peripherals, salvation and non-salvation issues. One criticism of churches is we emphasize our (usually non-essential) distinctives and deemphasize the common, essential truths of our faith. In the 17th century, Rupert Melendius encouraged Christians to have unity in the essentials, freedom in non-essentials, and love in all things. That's good advice.

What is the truth? What are the essentials? Consider Ephesians 4:1-6. Also consider the [Apostle's Creed](#), dating from the 4th century. For almost over 1600 years this summary of essential Christian belief has been accepted as a good basic synopsis of core Christian beliefs. What do Ephesians and the creed emphasize?

- We believe in one God who reveals Himself in three persons – Father, Son (Jesus), and Holy Spirit.
- We believe in the church as those – of whatever denomination – who believe in Jesus.
- Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, we believe in the forgiveness of sin and eternal life.

Ephesians and the Apostle's Creed do not mention church governance, theories of end times, perspectives on "spiritual gifts," mode of baptism, criteria for church membership, or other things we get hung up on.

The majority of the Apostle's Creed – and the entire New Testament – focuses on Jesus. Christianity **is** Jesus Christ. As we think about what is essential in Christianity, we must focus on the person and ministry of Jesus. Our name, "Christian" (given to us by the Romans because "Christ" made us distinct from other faiths, including Judaism) comes from Jesus' epithet "Christ" ("the anointed"). Our symbol is a cross, the cross of Jesus. Our holiest event, communion, is a celebration of Jesus. We pray "in Jesus' name."

If we are feeling ill, our doctor needs to know the truth about our condition. She needs to know the truth about treatment options. Not knowing the truth can, literally, kill us.

The same is true spiritually. Knowing the truth about Jesus is essential. When we feel overwhelmed by our past, gnawed at by our guilt, struggling with our self-esteem, unsure whether we have worth, we need to know the truth about our condition – we all have issues with sin. And we need to know the truth about the only treatment option. Only Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. Only Jesus is the truth that can set us free. Forgiveness and salvation only come through Jesus. Not knowing the truth, ultimately, will kill us. Theologian, John Stott writes, *"To be a Christian is to accept Jesus Christ as God and Saviour. The irreducible minimum of Christian belief is that Jesus is the unique God/man who died for our sins and was raised from death to be the Saviour of the world."* What is God saying to me?

*I praise you for the life that stirs within me.
 I praise you for the bright and beautiful world into which I go.
 I praise you for earth and sea and sky,
 for scudding cloud and singing bird.
 I praise you for the work you have given me to do.
 I praise you for all that you have given me to fill my leisure hours.
 I praise you for family.
 I praise you for my friends.
 I praise you for music and books and good company and all pure pleasures.
 I praise you for the mission you give me to be good news in the world.
 Amen.*

John Baillie (1886-1960)

Sunday, October 23: Revelation 2:12-17 (Pergamum)

We do need to know the truth about Jesus (yesterday). That truth ought to then shape how we live.

John Stott continues, *"We may not (in fact we do not) fully **understand** these truths about the person and work of Jesus Christ, but Christians **believe** them and **act on** them. Conviction leads to commitment. If Jesus is the divine Saviour, we must trust him as our Saviour."* We live the truth. Even when it is difficult. More than just believing right things about Jesus, some believers in Pergamum lived out their faith, trusting Jesus with their lives (even to the point of dying for their faith, in the case of Antipas). True belief is more than right doctrine. True belief involves acting, in faith, on those truths: trusting, obeying, living, risking ...

This living out the truth in practice was a problem for others in Pergamum. There is a reference to Balaam/ Nicolaitans (both referring to the same issue). We have come across them before. To Ephesus, Jesus said, *"You hate the evil deeds of the Nicolaitans, just as I do."* In Pergamum, however, they were welcome.

Some background: Balaam was a Jewish prophet who sold his gifts of prophecy to King Balak of Moab, Israel's enemy, to curse the Israelites (Numbers 22-25). God intervened, preventing Balaam from cursing Israel (his curses turned to blessings). Balaam came up with another scheme: if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. He encouraged Moabite girls to seduce Israelite men with feasts and sexual favors. As a result, he reasoned, the Israelites would abandon the true God, following their stomachs and lusts to destruction. He was right. Following their appetites, Israelites were lured away from God. They slipped comfortably into worshiping the Moabite gods and living the amoral lifestyle that went with it. 24,000 Israelites died.

Apparently in Pergamum, some teachers (the Nicolaitans) were undermining the church in the same way. In their celebration of Christian "freedom," anything was OK. "Freedom" in Christ meant you could follow your stomach and your lusts wherever they took you (including temple feasts, prostitution, and who knows what else) ... When you insist on absolute personal freedom, you inevitably wander away from God.

Paul warns us, *"Christ has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free ... You have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters. But don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' ... So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves. The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires ..."*

"When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God."

"But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things."

"Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives"(Galatians 5:1-25).

Does truth matter? Absolutely. Our calling is to know the truth – Jesus. Does it matter how we live? Absolutely. We think critically about our culture, think deeply about our faith, and make wise, thoughtful choices based on what we know is true and right. We are called to live as Jesus would live if He were living our lives. We are called to know the truth and live the truth: and the truth will set us free ...

*Grant me, O Lord, to know what I ought to know,
To love what I ought to love,
To praise what delights You most,
To value what is precious in Your sight,
To hate what is offensive to You.
Do not let me judge according to the sight of my eyes,
Nor to pass sentence according to the hearing of my own, ignorant ears;
But help me to discern with a true judgment what is true and good,
And above all, always to ask You what is the good pleasure of Your will.
Lord, You know what is best;
let this be done or that be done as You please.
Give what You will, as much as You will, when You will.
Do with me as You know best, as will most please You, and will be for Your greater honor.
Place me where You will and deal with me freely in all things.
I am in Your hand; turn me about whichever way You will.
Here I am, Your servant, ready to obey in all things.
Not for myself do I desire to live, but for You –
would that I could do this worthily and perfectly.
Amen*

Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471)

Monday, October 24: 1 Peter 3:1-12 (Pergamum)

Let's return to 1 Peter. 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. People in Pergamum struggled to live out their faith in a hostile environment, too. Compromise was so tempting. The Nicolaitans were teaching people it was OK to give in to all those temptations.

As Peter begins to speak to wives, husbands, and people within the church, Peter is realistic – people are not perfect. To cite a familiar slogan: *"Christians are not perfect. Just forgiven."*

Notice Peter does not divide 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 culture where people (especially women) are evaluated by their appearance, 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 or fume over an offense: forgive – for your own 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?

*God listen to my prayer;
my earnest petition to come to you
for I know that you are hearing me as surely as though I saw you with my own eyes.
Anything that is amiss in my soul,
anything that is wrong in my life
may you, O God, sweep it from me and may you shield me in your love.
Let no thought come to my heart,
let no sound come to my ear,
let no temptation come to my eye,
let no fragrance come to my nose,
let no fancy come to my mind,
let no ruffle come to my spirit,
that is hurtful to my body or my soul this day or this night.
May you, yourself, O God of life, be in front of me, and behind me,
may you be my guiding-star,
may you be my Lord,
from my life's beginning to my life's end.
Amen*

Celtic prayer

Tuesday, October 25: 1 Peter 3:13-22, 4:12-19 (Pergamum)

Peter, John, and Christians in places like Ephesus, Smyrna, and Pergamum lived in tough times. They were verbally and physically abused. They were dragged into court and thrown in prison. Many were executed.

Peter wrote this letter in the early 60's AD. Under Nero, who became emperor in 54 AD, Christians were viciously persecuted. Nero was evil. 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 conveniently just where he wanted to build). Roman historian Tacitus, however, notes 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 had Peter crucified upside down (Peter felt he was not worthy to die as Jesus died); this, apparently, is a much slower and more painful way to die.

John wrote Revelation a bit later than Peter's letter. However, persecution was clearly still a reality for people who followed Jesus. The letters written to the churches (Revelation 2-3) certainly highlight this.

We don't like to think 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.

Suffering and persecution is the experience of Christians in many parts of the world today.

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?

*Father, I abandon myself into your hands:
do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do with me, I thank you.
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me, and in all your creatures –
I wish no more than this, Lord.
Into your hands, I entrust my soul.
I offer it to you with all the love of my heart, for I love you, Lord.
I need to give myself
and to surrender myself into your hands,
without reserve,
and with unlimited confidence,
for you are my Father.
Amen.*

Charles de Foucauld (1856-1916)

Wednesday, October 26: 1 Peter 4:1-11 (Pergamum)

"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 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 already being made new. That process began at the cross, blossomed through the resurrection, and continues in the Spirit, 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 new people He created us to be, free from all those sins of the past.

Peter and his friends had experienced the amazing transforming power of the Holy Spirit. Writing about the transformation the Spirit brings, he says: *"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, love, kindness, mercy ...

You can make a 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 can ALL 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 a heart that loves Jesus and shares 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?

*How poorly we repay you, my Lord,
for all the good things you have given us.
In your majesty, you seek all kinds of ways and means
by which to show us the love you have for us.
Yet we hold this in low esteem, because we are so inexperienced in loving you.
Because we haven't practiced loving you as we should,
our thoughts follow their usual pattern
and we do not bother to ponder the great mystery
of the ways the Holy Spirit speaks to us.*

*Majestic King, forever wise,
you melt my heart, which once was cold,
and when your beauty fills my eyes,
it makes them young, which once were old.
Christ, my Creator, hear my cry;
I am yours, you can I hear,
my Savior, Master, yours am I;
my heart to yours be ever near.
Whether in life or death's last hour,
if sickness, pain or health you give,
or shame, or honor, weakness, power –
thankful is the life I live.
Amen.*

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

Thursday, October 27: 1 Peter 5 (Pergamum)

The church *is* everyone. The church is *for* everyone. It is men and women, children and seniors, well-off and less well-off, from every nation. 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 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.

Denominationally, as a church, we are affiliated with

- 180+ other churches and camps across Western Canada (Canadian Baptists of Western Canada, 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), 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's a great verse to hang on to. Why not memorize it? More difficult: practice doing it.

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace,
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy;
O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood as to understand;
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive;
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen*

Francis of Assisi (1181-1226)

Friday, October 28: Hebrews 2:1-4, 14-18 and 4:14-16 (Pergamum)

Jesus wants the people of Pergamum to know the truth – the truth in terms of right beliefs about Jesus, **AND** the truth in terms of living out our faith, faithfully.

That sounds easy. In truth, it is a challenge to live conscientiously, comprehensively, and consistently as people of Jesus. In practice, we struggle to know what the appropriate Christian response and way to live in the nitty gritty of life is. What, if anything, might my Christian beliefs say about:

- How I invest my money?
- How I deal with that person who has hurt me?
- Who I support politically – locally? Provincially? Federally?
- Whether I attend church in-person or online? (if in-person is an option for me)
- How I understand issues from abortion access, to medical assistance in dying, to LGBTQ+ perspectives, to the “freedom Convoy” movement, to the war in Ukraine, to coal mines in the Crowsnest Pass, to immigration policies, to ...?
- How I spend my free time, leisure, or retirement?
- How I share my faith with my family? Friends?
- What I read or watch online?

Of course, there are many, many more challenging issues to work through as well.

We may face discouragement, criticism, and disagreement when we do try to live out our faith.

Reflect on Hebrews 2:18: *"Since he himself has gone through suffering and testing, he is able to help us when we are being tested."* How is that encouraging to you, today?

Reflect on Hebrews 4:14-16: *"So then, since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most."* How is that helpful to you, today?

*You, eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are a deep sea,
and the more I enter into you the more I find,
and the more I find the more I seek.
My soul cannot be satisfied without you,
for it continually hungers for you, the eternal Trinity,
desiring to see you with the light of your light.
As the heart desires springs of living water,
so my soul desires to leave the prison of this dark body and see you in truth.
Eternal God, what more could you give me than yourself?
You are the fire that burns without being consumed.
You consume in your heart all my soul's self-love and sin.
You are the fire that takes away the cold and darkness in my soul.
With your light, I pray that you might illuminate me
so that I may know all your truth.
Clothe me with yourself, eternal truth,
so I may run this mortal life in true obedience,
guided by the light of your most holy love and truth.
Amen.*

Catherine of Siena (1347-1386)

Saturday, October 29: Revelation 2:18-29 (Thyatira)

Think about a parent with a strong-willed child whom she loves dearly. Does she say, *"Whatever you want you deserve; that store owner should have let you walk out with the pop without paying for it ... Whatever you want to do is great: if you choose to play in the traffic or put your baby sister's finger in the outlet ... wonderful. I love you so much I will accept and affirm anything you choose to do"*? No.

A loving parent provides guidance and instruction. True love balances care and truth, compassion and discipline, welcome and correction, because some choices – that may seem wonderful – are, in fact, bad.

God does love us unconditionally. God loved us and Jesus died for us, long before we loved Him. But does God's unconditional love mean He unconditionally approves of all our decisions and behaviors? No. That would not be love. God's love, like any good parent's love, provides guidance and instruction, compassion and discipline, welcome and correction. God's love is all about **welcoming** unconditionally ... but it is not about **affirming** unconditionally. True love – as God shows it to us – never leaves a loved one unaware of the truth. Love warns us of unhealthy choices. Real love includes guidance and discipline.

In Thyatira, God's praise doesn't get much better than this: *"I have seen your love, your faith, your service, and your patient endurance..."* Thyatira rivals Ephesus in service and hard work, **but they kept their love, too**. They patiently endure suffering, like the Christians at Smyrna. They keep the truth that was being compromised at Pergamum. This is a growing church: *"I can see your constant improvement in all these things / You are now doing more than you did at first"* (depending on your translation).

But there is a cancer in Thyatira: they tolerate this "Jezebel" (an Old Testament reference, not her real name), teaching people to live in ways that were not the truth. Thyatira had love: people come with diverse backgrounds, issues, problems, challenges and are welcome. Praise God. But people are so welcome, they can teach/do whatever they want. In Thyatira, love means anything goes.

Paul encourages us to grow up in our faith and be wiser and more discerning. He says, *"These are the gifts Christ gave His church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be **mature** in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. Then we will **no longer be immature** like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. Instead, we will speak the truth in love, **growing** in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church"* (Ephesians 4:11-15).

As we grow in faith, we learn more and more how to walk the tightrope, finding the balance between truth and love. How do I unconditionally welcome everyone ... but don't unconditionally affirm every choice or decision? Jesus always spoke the **truth** in **love**. How can I speak the **truth**, in **love**, as He did?

*We humbly beg you, Lord,
give us more love for you and for our neighbors.
Give us more joy in worship,
more peace at all times,
more long-suffering, gentleness,
and kindness of heart and manner.
May we know something of what it means to be filled with Holy Spirit.
May the memory of our baptism reaffirm our faith today.
Or may your Spirit move us to take that step of faith,
affirming you as Saviour, and following you as Lord.
For the sake of Jesus Christ, our Saviour and our King,
that His Kingdom come on Earth as it in Heaven.
Amen.*

Sunday, October 30: Revelation 2:18-29 (Thyatira)

When we first come to know Jesus, we are "spiritual infants." We live, breathe, and have our being in Jesus. Wonderful. We enjoy the newness of having our pasts forgiven, our souls cleansed, fellowship with a family of believers, knowing some basics of life. But, mature though we think we are, we always have more to learn. We keep growing. Childhood is fine for a season, but if we won't take on the responsibilities of growing up, we can tend toward one extreme or the other: either (1) all loving with no discernment about truth, or (2) all rules/truth with no unconditional love. Staying in childhood, we never learn that balance.

If we stay young in our faith, we can be attracted to teachers who promise "deeper" experiences. But we don't have the wisdom or discernment to know whether they are telling us the truth or, like this "Jezebel," spinning us a lie. In the Old Testament, Jezebel introduced a religion to Israel which worshipped foreign gods and in which sexual immorality was celebrated as "spiritual." Thyatira's Jezebel, with a blend of spiritual "freedom" that mixed Christian truth with the "freedom" to follow your lusts, found willing disciples. People, young in faith, looking to go "deeper," were easily seduced.

How do we become more mature, so we can discern truth and error, and balance truth and love? It does take work. It takes reading. It takes prayer. It takes discipline. It takes time. We need:

- to have good information; we need to know the truth (Jesus is the truth, so we need to know Jesus [John 14:6]). We must do the hard work of Bible study. Prayer. Putting our faith into action.
- to allow God to speak into our lives, convict, and correct us (Revelation 2-3). Knowing about the truth, we must allow God, by His Holy Spirit, to apply it to our lives and then put it into practice.
- the encouragement, wisdom, and experience of wise mentors. Be part of a community – people of different ages, experiences, and backgrounds (not just people like yourself) – helps you grow.

Like the Thyatirans, the Galatians wrestled to balance truth and love (Galatia is just northeast of Thyatira). As we read last week, Paul says, *"It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life."* Great. This is what Jezebel is teaching. However, Paul goes on to say, *"Just make sure that you don't use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that's how freedom grows. For everything we know about God's Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. That's an act of true freedom."*

"What happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard – things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely ... Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives" (Galatians 5, *The Message*).

As we grow to "live the life of the Spirit" we can "see your constant improvement in all these things/do more than we did before." We can be a church about which God says, *"I know all the things you do. I have seen your love, your faith, your service, and your patient endurance ..."* We you speak the truth in love.

Lord Jesus, here I am.
Thank you that you are here with me.
You know who I am, what's going on in my life,
My joys, my fears, my hope, and my sorrows.
And you love me.
And you will walk with me.
And you will never leave me.
Thank you, Lord Jesus. Thank you.
Amen

Monday, October 31: 2 Peter 1 (Thyatira)

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 right 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). Grow up. Stay connected with all generations. Learn from those who have wisdom. Don't go wild. 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 or enlightenment. It's all about **you**, by **your** efforts; **you** must be good enough for **you** to get to God or inner peace. 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?

*I praise you, Lord, the God of love,
 who has given your people a way to have perfect peace with you.
 I praise you, Lord, the God of forgiveness,
 who wants to bury your people's sins in the depths of your intentional forgetfulness.
 I praise you, Lord, the God of perfect provision,
 who has given your people everything they need to live the life you've given them to live.
 I praise you, Lord, the perfectly holy God,
 who reaches down to such imperfect creatures as us.
 Lord, thank you for designing us so that we can praise you
 from our hearts and with our mouths.
 Thank you for allowing us to praise your name.
 Let us simply look at who you are and what you mean to us ...
 We WANT to praise your name with our whole beings.
 Father, I don't always know how to praise you as you are worthy
 – what words to say or actions to take –
 I ask that you take all my words and all my actions
 and make them into fitting praise to your name.
 Amen.*

Tracy Macon Sumner

Tuesday, November 1: 2 Peter 2 (Thyatira)

You could create your own religion. Use Christian-sounding language, but change the message ("Jezebel" in Thyatira, and the Nicolaitans in Ephesus and Pergamum were doing this ...)

- 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, clean up on social media, 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 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 Workday Prayer (adapt to your own circumstances ...)

*Lord Jesus, as I enter this workplace, I bring your presence with me.
I speak your peace, your grace, and your perfect order into the atmosphere of this office.
I acknowledge your lordship over all that will be spoken, thought, decided and accomplished
within these walls. Lord Jesus, I thank you for the gifts you have deposited in me.
I do not take them lightly, but commit to use them responsibly and well.
Give me a fresh supply of truth and love on which to draw as I do my job.
Anoint my creativity, my ideas, my energy so that even my smallest task may bring you honor.
Lord, when I am confused, guide me. When I am weary, energize me.
Lord, when I am burned out, infuse me with the light of your Holy Spirit.
May the work that I do and the way I do it bring hope, life,
and courage to all I come in contact with today.
And, Lord, even in this day's most stressful moment, may I rest in you.
Amen.*

Author unknown

Wednesday, November 2: 2 Peter 3 (Thyatira)

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 (Acts 1). 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. 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?

*Loving heavenly Father, thank you for your Holy Spirit
who fills our hearts with a serene assurance that we belong to you forever.
How wonderful to be a child of the great King over all the earth,
a God of love who does not desire that any should perish.
Take away doubts and fears when we become estranged to you or experience a dark night of the soul.
When suffering strikes or injustice happens, let us not blame you.
Help us understand that all things inevitably work for the good
for those who love God and are called according to his purpose.
Grant us the things that lead to assurance –
greater faith, greater trust, and greater hope.
As we grow in assurance, then lead us to endurance,
knowing that we can overcome any obstacle, even death itself.
Amen.*

James S. Bell Jr.

Thursday, November 3: Acts 13:1-12 (Thyatira)

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), the various letters in the New Testament, and these letters to the churches in Revelation, 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 little 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 – the Blankenstyns (Rosslyn Academy, Kenya) and Lisa Ratzlaff (with SIM in Zambia) – 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: Mark, Dawn, Alea, Lorraine, Renae, and Aaron Blankenstyn, Lisa Ratzlaff, Cuban Baptists, Mill Creek, and more. Pray for them, too.

*Lord, when I read your word,
I can't help but see how unable I am to live out what it says.
Remind me every day that, in my own power, living and talking
the way you call me to live and talk is utterly impossible.
Remind me that it is only through the power of your Holy Spirit
that I can even come close to being all that I can be in you.
Show me every day areas in my life that I haven't given over to you,
areas where I am not relying on you to do through me what I can't do for myself.
Help me to see the open door to serve you,
And give me the courage to walk through it.
Amen.*

Tracy Macon Sumner

Friday, November 4: Philippians 4:4-9 (Thyatira)

How are you feeling today? Sad? Tired? Angry? Frustrated? Joyful?

This is the conclusion of Paul’s letter to his friends in Philippi. Paul is now in prison in Rome. He has lost his freedom. He is awaiting trial. He will be executed. How do his circumstances rate compared to yours?

What is Paul saying to you?

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?

What is God saying to me?

*Lord, for tomorrow and its needs, I do not pray;
keep me, my God, from the stain of sin, just for today.
Let me both diligently work, and duly pray;
let me be kind in word and deed, just for today.
Let me be slow to do my will, prompt to obey;
help me to sacrifice myself, just for today.
And if today, my tide of life should ebb away,
give me the assurance of your presence divine, sweet Lord, today.
So for tomorrow and its needs, I do not pray;
but keep me, guide me, love me, Lord, just for today.
Amen.*

Augustine (354-430)

Saturday, November 5: Revelation 3:1-6 (Sardis) TIME CHANGE TONIGHT

Sardis, considered by the Greeks to be one of the greatest cities of the ancient world, was the capital of the province (once the Kingdom) of Lydia. Sheer cliffs rise from the farmland below to a citadel above the plain. The Greek writer, Lucian, quipped that to capture the acropolis of Sardis was a metaphor for doing the impossible. It was impregnable.

Sardis was also famous in Greek legend as the place where King Midas washed off his Golden Touch, creating golden sands and fantastic wealth (gold was mined around the city). Later, King Gyges of Sardis minted the world's first coins. Sardis' glory had faded by the time Revelation was written, but the city still thought of itself as the greatest city in the world (not to be outdone by young upstarts like Rome).

King Croesus of Sardis, eager to expand his kingdom, asked the Oracle of Delphi about whether he should go to war with Persia. The Oracle told Croesus that, if he attacked Persia, he would destroy a great empire. Croesus went to war. After a few indecisive battles, Croesus fell back to Sardis for winter. The Persians, unexpectedly, pursued him. Croesus had spent vast sums of money reinforcing his fortress, so he wasn't concerned. But on the fourteenth day of the siege the impregnable citadel fell. At night, one young Persian soldier had climbed to a point, "*where no guard was stationed, for there was no fear that it would ever be captured at that place, for the acropolis is sheer and impregnable there*" (Herodotus). He opened the gates and the Persian forces swarmed in. The great fortress of Sardis was defeated by one sneaky youth.

A great empire had been destroyed: King Croesus' own kingdom. Greek philosophers drew clear moral lessons from Sardis: Pride comes before a fall. All the money in the world can't buy true security. True strength only comes by constant vigilance.

In Sardis, the fine looking, impressive church was vulnerable to attack. Not an open assault by obvious heretics, Roman authorities, other religions, of atheists, but subtle, insidious sneak attacks. The people had been walking in white clothes ... but their clothes were getting dirty. They had not done anything obviously filthy (like the previous cities' compromises with idol worship, immorality, and "Jezebel"), but they had

wandered into enough moral mud puddles that their white robes had become various shades of grey.

They needed to "*wash their clothes*" and clean up their act. They needed to examine themselves, ask God to show them their sin, confess it, and repent. Otherwise, sneaky enemies would destroy them. Spiritual pride can come before a fall, too. Resting on our laurels is not good enough. We need to be continually evaluation whether we do genuinely "*love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength*" and "*love our neighbour as ourselves*" or if we are just going through the motions.

Jesus says to His people in Sardis, "*I find that your actions do not meet the requirements of my God. Go back to what you heard and believed at first; hold to it firmly. Repent and turn to me again. If you don't wake up, I will come to you suddenly, as unexpected as a thief*" (3:2-3). Drawing on their own history, Jesus warns them, "*If you don't wake up, I will come to you suddenly, as unexpected as a thief*" (3:3).

What might Jesus be saying to me?

*We give you honour and praise, Lord our God,
for all the tender mercies you so freely give us throughout the week.
Endless praise to you for creating us in your image,
for redeeming us by the precious blood of your dear Son when we were lost,
and for setting us apart through your Holy Spirit.
We thank you for your help and support in our times of need,
for your protection in the many dangers to body and soul,
for your comfort in our sorrows,
for granting us the continued gift of life,
and for being so patient with us
and giving us so much time to repent of our sins.
For these and all your blessings we have received, only because of your goodness, we thank you
and ask you to fill us continually with the Holy Spirit
so we can grow in your unmerited favour,
remain sure in our faith,
and continue on in doing good.
Amen.*

John Knox (1513-1572)

Sunday, November 6: Revelation 3:1-6 (Sardis) Time Change Last Night

The church in Sardis reflected the city itself. The glory of the church in Sardis was its past: "*I know all the things you do, and that you have a reputation for being alive...*" The church, like the city, looked alive and well. But there was a distinction between what people saw and what God saw: "*... but you are dead.*" The church in Sardis could learn from God's Word: "*The Lord doesn't see things the way you see them. People judge by outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.*" (1 Samuel 16:7).

Sardis may be the first church of "nominal" Christians in history. They were Christians in name. They were not believers in heart.

Spirituality can become just hollow, empty religion when it's reputation without reality, form without power, truth without love, and outward appearance without inward integrity. The word Jesus uses to describe good, religious people like this is "hupokrites" – a Greek word literally meaning "play-actor." In Greek theatre, actors would wear masks to portray a role, character, or virtue. They wore masks to show who they were supposed to be. But they were just playing a role. "Hypocrisy," at its root, simply means playing a role, wearing a mask, looking like something you're not. Does that ever happen in church?

Hopefully none of us wants to be a hypocrite, wearing a spiritual mask.

We need to be honest with ourselves. Who are we really? Forget the masks, roles, and good fronts we may show to other people and ask: before God who am I, really? I need to check my spiritual pulse: do I genuinely love God? Do I think about Him? Pray to Him? Spend time with Him? Do I live out my faith? Do I put God's principles into action in my life?

God is saying to Sardis – and to us – if we want meaningful lives, if we really want to move forward in faith, and if we want to live for God and make a difference in our community, then we need to be honest and authentic. We need to be honest about our struggles. We need to be truthful about our sins, confess them, and repent. In humility, we need to ask God to guide us, fill us, and empower us.

Jesus says, "*Wake up. Strengthen what little remains, for even what is left is almost dead. I find that your actions do not meet the requirements of my God. Go back to what you heard and believed at first; hold to it firmly. Repent and turn to me again.*" He is challenging us to allow His Spirit to change us, to transform us from the inside out.

We all possess God's Spirit. The question is, does God's Spirit possess us?

*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