

**August 2023**

# **Prayer: Talking with God 4**

**Readings,  
Reflections,  
Prayers**



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**Monday, August 14: Ephesians 3:1-13**

We like to think we're special. More special than anyone else. First Century Jews believed they were special. God loved them and ONLY them. No one else. They were God's special people, God's ONLY special people. There were Jews and then there was everyone else – "Gentile dogs" – like me.

Do we ever think like that? We may not think in terms of Jewish-exceptionalism, but do we think God loves Caucasian North American/Northern European people most of all? Do we feel God loves us more than Arabic, African, Asian, First Nations – or Jewish – people? Do we feel we have a God-given right to "our" country but people from Asia, Africa, South America, and the Middle East should go "home"? First Nations people? We're not sure how to handle them. Stop! Any racism is racism. It's evil. It's sinful.

Paul wants us to know God loves everyone equally. He cares as much about First Nations people as any European-background Canadian. He cares as much about the survivor of genocide in Rwanda as He does about the wealthiest Bay Street businessperson. He cares as much about the families of Syrian refugees as He does about your family. He loves those suffering persecution as much as He loves you. This is not to say God loves you any less (you are His beloved child): it is to say God loves each of these precious beloved children of His – in Turkiye, India, Thailand, Syria – just as much as you and I.

God loves all people equally, regardless of their ethnicity, ability, gender, age, country of origin. Why do we make God so small He must only love people like us? Isn't God "big" enough to love everyone?

God's love, grace, and mercy are far bigger and all-encompassing than we imagine.

*"Because of Christ and our faith in him," Paul writes from prison in Rome, "we can now come boldly and confidently into God's presence" (3:12).* We can all come into the presence of the King of Kings. When we pray – for our brothers and sisters, our family, or those who suffer – we know God hears us.

Take time to pray for those in our local community and around the world who are victims of violence, who live in poverty, who need justice, who struggle with life, and who are "different" from us.

Of course, we cannot change the world. We don't have the ear of government officials. We have little formal influence. But we may be able to bring a smile to one discouraged person today. We may be able to show a tiny expression of love to someone who feels unloved. We may be able to help one person who is struggling. We may choose to treat a person who feels unwanted with dignity and compassion.

Together, we can make a difference, one beloved child of God at a time ...

*O Creator past all telling,  
you have set out all parts of the universe so beautifully.  
You are the true fount of wisdom.  
You are the noble origin of all things.  
Lord, please shed the beam of your light and warmth  
on the darkness of my mind to dispel my ignorance and sin.  
Please guide my speech and touch my lips with graciousness.  
Make me keen to understand, quick to learn,  
able to remember;  
make me wise to interpret and ready to speak.  
Guide my going out, and my going back,  
my going forward, and my coming home.  
For You are true God and true man,  
and live for ever and ever.  
Amen*

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

## Tuesday, August 15: Ephesians 3:14-21

"When I think of all this ..." All what? What has Paul been thinking about? A LOT:

- *God loves us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. (1:4-5)*
- *God saves us. And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. (1:13)*
- *Even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. It is only by God's grace that you have been saved. For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Jesus. (2:5-6)*
- *God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago. (2:8-10)*
- *Christ himself has brought peace to us. He united Jews and Gentiles into one people when, in his own body on the cross, he broke down the wall of hostility that separated us. He did this by ending the system of law with its commandments and regulations. He made peace between Jews and Gentiles by creating in himself one new people from the two groups. (2:14-15)*
- *So now you Gentiles (non-Jews) are no longer strangers and foreigners. You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family. Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself. We are carefully joined together in him, becoming a holy temple for the Lord. Through him you Gentiles are also being made part of this dwelling where God lives by his Spirit. (2:19-22)*
- *Because of Christ and our faith in him, we can now come boldly and confidently into God's presence. (3:12)*

"When I think of all this ..."

- *I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth.*
- *I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you (plural – you, personally, and all of us together) with inner strength through his Spirit.*
- *Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him (you-plural – you, personally, and all of us together). Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong.*
- *And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is (you-plural – you, personally, and all of us together).*
- *May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully (you-plural – you, personally, and all of us together).*
- *Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God (you-plural – you, personally, and all of us together).*

"Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within **us**, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever. Amen." (3:14-21). That just about says it all.

*O Lord, teach me to seek you.  
Please reveal yourself to me when I do look for you.  
For I cannot seek you, unless you first teach me,  
nor find you, unless you first reveal yourself to me.  
Let me seek you in longing,  
and long for you in seeking.  
Let me find you in love,  
and love you in finding.  
You and you alone are all my soul longs for,  
my Father, my Saviour, Holy Spirit of grace,  
Amen*

Ambrose of Milan (340-397)

### **Wednesday, August 16: Ephesians 4:1-16**

Prayer is wonderful. It's so good to talk with God. As we pray, prayer often changes us.

How we live matters. We are NOT saved by how we live. We are saved by faith (2:1-10). But **BECAUSE** we are saved by faith, **then** we ought to live lives that glorify God. How we live shows what we really believe. We can say we believe all sorts of good things, but if we don't live out those beliefs, how genuine are our "beliefs," really? And life just works better when we our beliefs and actions are aligned.

Paul says: *"Here's what I want you to do. While I'm locked up here, I want you to get out there and walk – better yet, run! – on the road God called you to travel. I don't want any of you sitting around on your hands. I don't want anyone strolling off, down some path that goes nowhere. And mark that you do this with humility and discipline – not in fits and starts, but steadily, pouring yourselves out for each other in acts of love, alert at noticing differences and quick at mending fences. You were all called to travel on the same road and in the same direction, so stay together, both outwardly and inwardly. You have one Master, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who rules over all, works through all, and is present in all. Everything you are and think and do is permeated with Oneness."* (4:1-6, *The Message*)

One of Paul's points is authentic Christian belief leads to humility, gentleness, patience, love, peace, and unity (a list that complements Paul's "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 3:22-23). If we see these qualities of character in our lives, that means we're drawing closer to Jesus. But if we are not humble, not gentle, not patient, not loving, not peaceful, and if we are causing dissension and division ... then we are **not** walking with Jesus. That is a sobering warning when we are grumpy and complain-y.

Paul reminds us we all have gifts, talents, abilities, experiences, and resources from God. We can use these to build up the body of Christ/God's people/church/Kingdom of God. None of us is all-gifted (none of us is good at everything). None of us is non-gifted (none of us has nothing to offer). We can all bring our different skills, abilities, talents, resources, and backgrounds and help God's Kingdom grow. Church servants – apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers – are among those gifted by God, but not the only ones. *"He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love"* (4:16).

God's goal for us all is *"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"* (4:14). We need to keep learning and growing. As a result, *"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"* (4:15). Note the phrase: speak **the truth in love**. There are people who speak the truth but do so in non-loving ways. Others are all about love, but there's no truth. Spiritual maturity balances both.

"Growing up" in our Christian faith means we learn to speak the truth – uncompromisingly – in genuine love – uncompromisingly. It's both-and not either-or. Humility, gentleness, patience, love, peace, unity, using our gifts, speaking the truth in love. May the Lord help us grow deeper in our walk with Him ...

*O Lord, give us a mind that is humble,  
 quiet,  
 peaceable,  
 patient  
 and charitable,  
 and a taste of your Holy Spirit in all our thoughts, words, and deeds.  
 O Lord, give us a lively faith,  
 a firm hope,  
 a fervent charity,  
 a love of you.  
 Take from us all lukewarm-ness in meditation,  
 and all dullness in prayer.  
 Give us fervor and delight in thinking of you,  
 your grace, and your tender compassion toward us.  
 Give us, good Lord, the grace to work for the things we pray for.  
 Amen*

Thomas More (1478-1535)

### **Thursday, August 17: Ephesians 4:17-32**

Our church isn't perfect. However, when I read through this passage, I wonder what the church in Ephesus is really like. If Paul has to list these things **NOT to do** – telling lies, getting angry, stealing, using foul and abusive language, being bitter, raging, using harsh words, and engaging in slander (as well as other types of "evil behavior") – were these things the Christians in Ephesians were doing? That's scary.

Perhaps, since many of them came out of Gentile (non-Jewish) backgrounds, they didn't know any better. However, the Old Testament prophets emphasize Jews had their issues with these problems, too.

Paul wants us to know believing in Jesus really is a case of starting all over, with a totally new identity. We are born again with a new set of values and ethics. *"Throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life, which is corrupted by lust and deception,"* Paul says. *"Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature, created to be like God – truly righteous and holy."*

Paul goes on to list things TO DO as well as what NOT to do ...

- *"Stop telling lies."* Instead, *"let us tell our neighbors the truth, for we are all parts of the same body."* We are brothers and sisters in Christ. Let's be truthful with one another.
- *"Don't sin by letting anger control you."* Instead, *"don't let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil."* Don't hold on to grudges. Let them go. When you cannot forgive, you suffer from anger, resentment, bad sleep, high blood pressure. The only one who suffers is you. Deal with your anger and resentments right now before they ruin another sleep.
- *"If you are a thief, quit stealing."* Instead, *"use your hands for good hard work, and then give generously to others in need."* Work is good for us; it's part of God's plan for us, in balance with rest and relaxation. Be generous with what you earn. Bless others.
- *"Don't use foul or abusive language."* Instead, *"let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them."* Try not to say a bad word about anyone. Say words that are kind, build up one another, and encourage one another.
- *"Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior."* Instead, *"be kind to each other, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you."* When we think of how God loves us with all our problems, we try to love others despite all their problems, too. God is so gracious to us. Can I be just as gracious to others?

"I beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God," Paul has said (Ephesians 4:1). As you read Ephesians 4, has the Holy Spirit reminded you of things you need to deal with in your life?

None of us is perfect yet. What do you need to work on? Has something from today's reading resonated with you? Of from yesterday: humility, gentleness, patience, love, peace, unity, using our gifts, speaking the truth in love? Pray about how you can live a life worthy of your calling ...

*God, our Father,  
good beyond all that is good,  
fair beyond all that is fair,  
in you is calmness, peace, and unity.  
Repair the things that divide us from each other  
and restore our unity of love,  
like your divine love.  
And as you are above all things,  
unite us in goodness and love,  
that we may be spiritually one,  
with you and with each other.  
We ask this through your peace, which makes all things peaceful  
and through the grace, mercy, and tenderness  
of your only Son, Jesus Christ.  
Amen.*

Dionysius of the Syrian Jacobite Church (9<sup>th</sup> Century)

### **Friday, August 18: Ephesians 5:1-20**

Have you ever written a letter or an email in chapters and verses? No? Neither have I. Neither did Paul. Our chapter/verse breaks are artificial. Chapters were added in the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD. Verses in the 16<sup>th</sup> century AD. So what we see as Ephesians 5 is just a continuation of Paul's thoughts in Ephesians 4. He had no break between the two sections.

Paul goes right **from** "Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, harsh words, and slander, as well as all types of evil behavior. Instead, be kind to each other, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you" **to** "Imitate God, therefore, in everything you do, because you are his dear children. Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ. He loved us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us, a pleasing aroma to God."

Paul lists more things that are not appropriate if we are trying to imitate God/follow the example of Christ: sexual immorality, impurity, greed, obscene stories, foolish talk, coarse jokes, acting thoughtlessly, and getting drunk. (We wonder if they may have been present in the church in Ephesus, too? Yikes!)

Let's focus on the positive things Paul lists. Who does he encourage us to become?

- *Imitate God in everything you do because you are his dear children.*
- *Live a life filled with love, following the example of Christ.*
- *Now you have light from the Lord. So live as people of light! For this light within you produces only what is good and right and true.*
- *Carefully determine what pleases the Lord.*
- *Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days.*
- *Understand what the Lord wants you to do.*
- *Be filled with the Holy Spirit, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, and making music to the Lord in your hearts.*
- *Give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*
- *Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*

As you read through this passage, what phrases or truths speak to you? Why?

Spend some time in prayer, asking God to help you follow the example of Jesus in your life ...

*Stay with me,  
and then shall I begin to shine as you shine;  
so to shine as to be a light to others.  
The light, O Jesus, will be all yours; none of it will be mine.  
It will be you, shining on others through me.  
Let me praise you in the way you love best,  
by shining on those around me.  
Let me preach you without preaching,  
not by words but by my example,  
by the influence of what I do;  
the evident fullness of the love my heart bears to you.  
Amen.*

Mother Teresa (1910-1997)

### **Saturday, August 19: Ephesians 5:21-32**

The word "submission" triggers interesting associations in modern culture. Few, if any, are good.

This passage begins "*Submit **to one another** out of reverence for Christ.*" Eugene Peterson, in his translation of the New Testament, *The Message*, tries to find a synonym that's less problematic: "*Out of respect for Christ, be courteously reverent to one another.*"

Notice that "submission" or "courteous reverence" is a two-way street. It's not about only one person submitting to someone else. There is always reciprocity. It is mutual submission.

Back in Paul's day, women had no legal status. They were more possessions than persons. This concept of mutual submission would have been radical and revolutionary in the male-dominated, patriarchal First Century (it's still radical and revolutionary in many parts of the world today, unfortunately).

Let's be radical and read about husbands first, because Paul has LOTS to say to husbands. **He says far more to MEN** than he does to the women:

Here's Ephesians 5:25-33 in *The Message* translation: "*Husbands, go all out in your love for your wives, exactly as Christ did for the church – a love marked by giving, not getting. Christ's love makes the church whole. His words evoke her beauty. Everything he does and says is designed to bring the best out of her, dressing her in dazzling white silk, radiant with holiness. And that is how husbands ought to love their wives. They're really doing themselves a favor – since they're already 'one' in marriage. No one abuses his own body, does he? No, he feeds and pampers it.*

*"That's how Christ treats us, the church, since we are part of his body. This is why a man leaves father and mother and cherishes his wife. No longer two, they become 'one flesh.' This is a huge mystery, and I don't pretend to understand it all. What is clearest to me is the way Christ treats the church. And this provides a good picture of how each husband is to treat his wife, loving himself in loving her, and how each wife is to honor her husband."*

A husband loving his wife as Jesus loves His church. Isn't that a powerful image of how a loving husband ought to be? Think about that a bit. Jesus' love for His church is not about power or control, it's about self-giving, self-sacrificing love. Jesus gives everything of Himself for His people.

Paul says **much less to wives**. "*Wives, understand and support your husbands in ways that show your*

*support for Christ. The husband provides leadership to his wife the way Christ does to his church, not by domineering but by cherishing. So just as the church submits to Christ as he exercises such leadership, wives should likewise submit to their husbands”* (Ephesians 5:25-28). Isn't that a neat way to see marriage?

Marriage, in God's eyes, is not about power. Marriage is all about sacrificial love, modelled on the love Jesus shows us through His life, death, and resurrection. Husbands are called to choose to serve their wives lovingly, putting them first. And wives are called to choose to serve their husbands lovingly, putting them first. There is a complete mutuality of love, submission, sacrifice, service, and courteous reverence.

The same ought to be true in all our relationships. How can we follow the example of Christ and imitate God's amazing love in our relationships: whether with spouses, parents, children, friends, colleagues, fellow students, neighbours? Pray through what it means for us to love one another as Jesus has loved us.

*Lord, make me your pupil too.  
With God's help, help me keep an eye on the movements in my heart,  
With the Holy Spirit, help me learn from my experiences,  
Grant me a humble willingness to let God convict and change me.  
May the Word of God transform me.  
Help me start from where I am, not from where we would like to be,  
Lord, make me who you truly created me to be.  
Amen.*

## **Sunday, August 20: Ephesians 6:1-9**

This passage is a continuation of Paul's teaching to *"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ"/"Out of respect for Christ, be courteously reverent to one another."* Remember the chapters and verses were added more than 1200 years after Paul wrote this letter.

Submission/courteous reverence is a two-way street in all relationships. It's not about one person submitting to some overlord. There is always reciprocity. Under each topic, let's continue to be radical and reverse the order once again:

### **1. Parents and children**

*"Fathers, don't exasperate your children by coming down hard on them. Take them by the hand and lead them in the way of the Master."* In Paul's day fathers had absolute power. It was assumed you would beat your children into submission. But what is Paul saying? What does this look like? We are to "honour our parents" but parents are to be "honour-able" people – people worthy of honour. If you are a parent/grandparent/mentor/friend, how can you put this into practice? How can you be "honour-able"?

*"Children, do what your parents tell you. This is only right. 'Honor your father and mother' is the first commandment that has a promise attached to it, namely, 'so you will live well and have a long life.'" Paul is not advocating blind submission if it means abuse or neglect. He is reminding us that our elders often do have wisdom that we do well to heed. Sometimes as children we think we know best, when, in fact our elders may know better. When wise people give you counsel, for our own good, pay attention and do it.*

### **2. Employers/masters and employees/servants**

*"Masters, it's the same with you. No abuse, please, and no threats. You and your servants are both under the same Master in heaven. He makes no distinction between you and them."* In the 1<sup>st</sup> Century this would have been shocking – no threats? No abuse? Really? Slaves were not "real" people – far less "human" even than women. Paul is challenging the natural order of things. Even servants are real people, worthy of respect. God loves them as much as masters. Everyone is equal in God's sight. This was mind-blowing.



*"Servants, respectfully obey your earthly masters but always with an eye to obeying the real master, Christ. Don't just do what you have to do to get by, but work heartily, as Christ's servants doing what God wants you to do. And work with a smile on your face, always keeping in mind that no matter who happens to be giving the orders, you're really serving God. Good work will get you good pay from the Master, regardless of whether you are slave or free."* Do you know anyone who only does the bare minimum? They work, but with a bad attitude? They resent every moment they're working? What is Paul saying to them? How can you put Paul's principle into practice?

Paul wants us to treat everyone – regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, income, ability, occupation, status – as equal in the sight of the Lord. No one is any less or more worthy than any other. We are all created in the image of God.

We love everyone in the same way that Jesus loves His church: sacrificially, completely, and unconditionally. How does this challenge you?

*Lord, Almighty God, Maker and Ruler of all creation,  
I pray that by your great mercy,  
you would guide me better than I can guide myself.  
Guide me to your will, for the good of my soul.  
Establish my mind in your will, for the good of my soul.  
Strengthen me against the Devil's temptations.  
Remove from me foul lusts and all unrighteousness.  
Shield me against my adversaries, seen and unseen.  
Teach me to do your will.  
May I love you fervently above all things,  
with clean mind and with clean body.  
You are my Creator, and my Redeemer,  
my Helper, my Comfort,  
my Trust, and my Hope.  
To you be all praise and glory now and forever and ever,  
world without any end.  
Amen*

King Alfred of Wessex (849-899)

## **Monday, August 21: Ephesians 6:10-24**

The Bible's teachings are great. **OTHER people** should really put them into practice. But they are very hard **for ME** to live out. Maybe I can just ignore them? Maybe God is making an exception in my case?

Paul's principles in his letter to the Ephesians sound great. But they can be very difficult to actually follow. It's a battle, a spiritual battle, to live out my faith.

Read these verses a few times. What phrases, thoughts, ideas strike you? What is God saying to you?

From 1976-2005, the Syrian army occupied Lebanon: they viciously abused the Lebanese people. Theft. Rape. Murder. Destruction. As recently as 20 years ago, Syrian soldiers were brutalizing Lebanese villages. Today, thanks to civil war in Syria, Syrian refugees continue to pour into Lebanon. Some Lebanese, remembering the horrors of the Syrian occupation, sadistically enjoy seeing their oppressors, the Syrians, suffer now. They are being nasty in return. Syrians deserve it.

But a Lebanese Christian pastor caring for Syrian refugees writes, *"Our war is a spiritual war and we are in the midst of the battlefield now. The Jews waited for the Messiah to cast the Romans out of their country but He cast the demons out of their children – He cast out the real enemy."*

The real enemies in Lebanon (and the world) are not the Syrians: they are the evil, sinful rebellious natures within each of us. The real enemy is our innate spirit of revenge and hate.

The pastor talks about how, through the power of the Spirit, people in His church are able to forgive and love their Syrian refugee neighbours: *"We are serving seven hundred families now. We are visiting them one by one trying to help with both hands, spiritually and physically. Many of the families are now coming to church on regular basis now. Many gave their lives to our Lord and Savior. We repeatedly hear: 'We had a wrong idea about Christianity.' Now is the time to reveal our real Christ."*

Anyone can hate. Anyone can be racist. Anyone can be anti-whatever. Anyone can build walls. Hate takes no special grace from God, gift of the Spirit, or even great wisdom or intelligence. Forgiveness **IS** a gift of God's grace. Loving one's enemy **IS** a gift from God. Only God's Spirit that can help us overcome hate. It is only God's blessing that allows us to see all people as equal children of God. To love them.

May the Lord help us to *"Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power"* (6:10) and reveal our Christ – in word and deed – as well. May people see the real Christ revealed in our lives.

Pray about what Jesus is saying to you.

*You are the Father who welcomes home  
the prodigal who has wandered far.  
You are the Father who prepares a meal  
when others would simply ignore.  
You are the Father whose love extends  
beyond our thoughts or minds.  
You are the Father who knows our hearts  
and yet loves us as we are.  
You are the Father whose word we trust  
in whose presence we have no fear.  
You are the Father whose tender touch  
makes a wounded spirit whole.  
You are the Father whose only Son  
was born that he might die.  
You are the Father whose gracious love  
we celebrate this day.  
Amen*

John Birch

## **Tuesday, August 22: Colossians 1:1-14**

- What should we pray for, for other people?
- What should we pray for, for our church?
- What should we pray for, for ourselves?

Paul loves to begin his letters to his friends in various churches with prayer. Today we are reading his prayer to the people in church in Colossae. Colossae was a city in western Turkey, not far from Ephesus (to whom Paul wrote Ephesians).

Paul wrote this letter from prison in Rome (like Ephesians, Philippians, and Philemon). Paul never visited Colossae; the church was founded by Epaphras and others who came to faith through Paul's ministry.

The church in Colossae had issues. Some people are suggesting any road to God is valid. If paganism works for you, if Roman religions work for you, or if philosophy works for you ... it's all good. Colossae was a pre-modern, post-modern city. Whatever works for you is true for you. Paul sees things differently. For

him, Jesus, and only Jesus, can bring us into relationship with God.

We live in a post-modern culture where personal experience, personal beliefs, personal values, personal ethics, personal morality, and personal rights are celebrated as the highest good. It's helpful for us to hear Paul speaking to us about absolute truth, absolute belief, absolute ethics, and absolute freedom.

Do you remember the parable of sower and the seed ([Matthew 13:1-23](#))? Paul uses that same metaphor. The seed, of course, is the good news about Jesus. "*This Good News that came to you,*" Paul says, "*is growing and bearing fruit ...*" (1:6). This is exactly what happens when seed falls on good soil.

What does the fruit look like? Paul says their faith leads to a "*confident hope of what God has reserved for you in heaven*" (1:5) and a "*love for all of God's people*" (1:4). Faith, hope, and love: these are key indicators of growth ([1 Corinthians 13:13](#)). In Galatians 5:22-23, Paul gives a more comprehensive list of indicators of spiritual growth: "*the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*"

Paul goes on to pray for the people in the church:

- "*We ask God to give you complete knowledge of his will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding.*" Why? "*Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and your lives will produce every kind of good fruit (there's that spiritual fruit, again). All the while, you will grow (there's 'growth' again.) as you learn to know God better and better.*"
- "*We also pray that you will be strengthened with all his glorious power so you will have all the endurance and patience you need. May you be filled with joy, always thanking the Father.*" Why? "*He has enabled you to share in the inheritance that belongs to his people, who live in the light. For he has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins.*"

Growth is essential in any healthy organism. As people loved by God, we can grow as we spend time with Jesus. We become more and more like Jesus (none of us is "there" yet, are we? I know I'm not).

Are you becoming more loving? More joyful? More at peace (in yourself? With others?) More patient? More kind? More 'good'? More faithful? More gentle? More self-controlled? If so, great. Keep at it. If not, pray that God would help you keep growing. And keep working at it.

Pray for our church, too, that, as a community, we would be strengthened by God's power and produce every kind of good fruit. What does that look like? How can we do that? How can you help?

*I can call you "Lord" with no difficulty.  
Words come so easily.  
What you love to see, Lord, is the evidence of love in my life.  
May I go to you, hear your words, and act on them.  
May I be as gracious and loving as you are.  
Amen.*

### **Wednesday, August 23: Colossians 1:15-23**

How do we live as *non*-lukewarm people? How do we keep growing, bearing fruit, in our lives? There are lots of books and lots of teachers with all sorts of ideas, advice, and self-help.

Paul points us back to Jesus. Life only makes sense – the world only makes sense – our faith only makes sense – when we are centered on Jesus. Coming back to Jesus, again and again, can help us live with passion, with purpose, and in ways that bear fruit.

In Jesus we discover who God is: "*Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.*" We cannot see God. We may be aware of His presence. Many people, many religions, many philosophies all sense there is Someone or Something spiritual, that is very real, but which cannot see. Jesus reveals God to us so that, when we look at Jesus, we are seeing God Himself.

The more we learn about Jesus and get to know Jesus, the more we learn about God and get to know God. Before Jesus came, God was a mystery. Since Jesus came, while we still cannot fully comprehend Him, we can know Him more a lot more than before. That's one of the reasons why, in 1:1-14, we can be thankful.

Jesus holds together the universe and gives us hope for the future. God – Father, Son, and Spirit – created and sustains the universe. He created it good, beautiful, wonderful, incredible, and amazing. The more we learn about creation (through science, for instance), the more we know God, the Creator.

Creation is marred by the reality of sin, but through Jesus' death on the cross and His resurrection, God reconciled us and everything else with Himself. We can look forward to eternal life with Him. This is a profound mystery which leads to an even deeper sense of awe and worship.

Jesus is the first example, the perfect template, of what it means to be truly human. As the head of the body (the church), as the one who overcame death, opened the door to eternal life, and is now in God's presence, He models what our future will be like. We will be those who pass through death to perfect life with God.

We experience a bit of this new life right now. Paul says, "*he has (already) reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he has (already) brought you into his own presence, and you are (already) holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault*" (1:22). He has already accomplished all this.

Of course, we are still limited in our experience of God this side of eternity. As Paul muses in 1 Corinthians, "*Now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known*" (13:12). Sigh. This makes it so challenging.

Our challenge is to live like Jesus here and now, too. That's tough. There are so many temptations. I make mistakes so often. My motives are not always what they should be.

*The God who breathed this world alive  
and sustains it day by day,  
whose hands flung stars into space  
and controls our destiny  
says, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you."*

*The God who filled the ocean depths  
and set tides on their way,  
who caused mountains to be raised up  
and rainbows to display  
Says, "I have called you by name, you are mine."*

*The God who made the fertile earth  
and seed within to sow,  
whose artistry creates butterflies  
and the early morning dew  
says, "You are precious in my sight."*

*God be my God both by day and by night, today and always,  
in the best of times and in all times.*

*Amen*

John Birch

**Thursday, August 24: Colossians 1:15-29** (Re-reading 1:15-23 and continuing through 1:24-29)

In verse 23, Paul says, "You must continue to believe this truth and stand firmly in it. Don't drift away from the assurance you received ..." What is he talking about?

Paul just wrote about Jesus, God Himself, our Creator, our Saviour, our Hope. "He **HAS** enabled you to share in the inheritance that belongs to his people, who live in the light. He **HAS** rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins. He **HAS** reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he **HAS** brought you into his own presence, and you **ARE** holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault" (1:12-14, 22). These are things Jesus has **ALREADY** done, finished, completed.

Re-read Paul's wonderful description of Jesus, this time in *The Message* translation (1:15-20):

*We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen.  
We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created.  
For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible,  
rank after rank after rank of angels –  
everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him.  
He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment.  
And when it comes to the church, he organizes and holds it together, like a head does a body.*

*He was supreme in the beginning and – leading the resurrection parade – he is supreme in the end.  
From beginning to end he's there, towering far above everything, everyone.  
So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding.  
Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe  
– people and things, animals and atoms –  
get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies,  
all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross.*

This same Christ "lives in you." He is "in you" (1:27). This is the key message Paul wants us to hear. Think about that. This Jesus is in you and me. I cannot even begin to comprehend that. Reflect again on Paul's prayer in [Colossians 1:9-14](#). What is God teaching you this week?

Paul talks about his "afflictions" (1:24). He is in prison in Rome. When you face hard times, how can the truth that **Christ is in you** – the Holy Spirit, God Himself is within you – encourage and strengthen you? Nothing and no one can ever separate you from Jesus. Pray through what that means in your life ...

*Almighty God, our heavenly Father,  
we have sinned against you and against our fellow men,  
in thought and word and deed,  
through negligence, through weakness,  
through our own deliberate fault.  
We are truly sorry and repent of all our sins.  
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, who died for us,  
forgive us all that is past.  
Grant that we may serve you in newness of life,  
to the glory of your name.  
Amen.*

*Be assured: "Almighty God, who forgives all who truly repent, will have mercy upon you, and will pardon you from all your sins, confirm and strengthen you in all goodness, and keep you in life eternal; through Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 John 1:9).*

## Friday, August 25: Colossians 2:1-9

In Colossae, many different religions, philosophies, and theories about life, the universe, and everything were popular. Greeks and Romans were fascinated by "mystery religions" with secret rites, hidden "wisdom" and elite "knowledge" for special people. Paul picks up on these 1<sup>st</sup> century "catch phrases" in 2:2-3. Then, there were the official Roman/Greek religions (Zeus/Jupiter and all their pantheon), the Emperor was worshipped as a god, there were philosophic religions (Platonism, Aristotelianism, etc.), and local religions.

These days there are lots of competing religions, theories, and philosophies, too ...

We need to know what to believe. Paul points us to Jesus. We need to know Jesus. Jesus is the One in whom we can trust. Why? Because Jesus is God himself (1:15-20). There are always lots of people peddling their philosophical wares. Paul encourages us get to know Jesus, God among us.

There are good, logical reasons to believe Jesus is God. We can investigate what He said and did. We can consider evidence for His resurrection. We can look at the astonishing growth and health of the church. And much more. Being a Christian is not a matter of faith in the face of evidence. Believing in Jesus is very much a logical step **based on evidence**. Of course, knowing Jesus is more than just believing in Him. Knowing Jesus involves recognizing His Spirit is in us, cultivating a personal relationship through prayer and reading, stepping out in faith, actively trusting Him, and seeking His counsel in our decisions.

With Jesus as our foundation, we keep growing. Paul mixes a growing-tree-producing-fruit metaphor with a building-on-a-solid-foundation metaphor: *"Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness."*

- In practical ways, how can you grow deep roots in Christ? What specific things could you do that would help you get to know Him better?
- In practical ways, how can you build your life on Him? What does it mean that Jesus is the foundation of your life?

Jesus tells this memorable story: *"Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."* (Matthew 7:24-27). What might God be saying to you, today?

*O God, all holy one, you are our Father, and we are your children.  
Open our eyes and our hearts so that we may discern Your work in the universe  
and be able to see your features in every one of your children.  
Help us to know that you have created us for family,  
for togetherness, for peace, for gentleness,  
for compassion, for caring, for sharing.*

*May we know that you want us to care for one another  
as those who know that they are sisters and brothers,  
members of the same family, your family, the human family.  
Help us to beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks,  
so that we may be able to live in peace and harmony,  
wiping away the tears from the eyes of those who are less fortunate than ourselves.  
And may we know war no more, as we strive to be what you want us to be:  
your children.*

*Amen*

Desmond Tutu (1931-2021)

## Saturday, August 26: Colossians 2:6-23

How do I follow Jesus in my city? How do I pray for my city?

Colossians is a letter to a specific group of believers in Jesus, in a particularly challenging city. Colossae and other 1<sup>st</sup> Century cities were wild, confusing places to try to follow Jesus.

Some Jewish-background believers insisted people coming to Jesus had to become Jews, first. They had to follow all the Old Testament laws such as circumcision, keeping the Sabbath, and other picayune laws.

There was lots of "spirituality." People followed Greek-Roman religions, "mystery" religions, and folk religions. They worshipped the new moon, the full moon, angels, mythical heroes, and emperors. Some people preached asceticism and self-denial. Others taught excess, and hedonism. Some people had "visions from God" and taught a personal form of spirituality. Others just followed the latest philosophers.

Not much has changed. For some, Christianity is all about following the "rules." If **you DO** the right things, God will love you. If **you DO** them well enough, and if **you DO** enough of them, **you** earn your salvation. This appeals to our human nature. We like to think we can earn God's favour. That seems fair, doesn't it? God loves good people. God doesn't love non-good people. It's about what **you DO**.

Other religions, philosophies, and theories have all sorts of other suggestions. Various world religions teach us to **do** all the right stuff (praying a certain number of times, worshipping in specific ways) to earn God's acceptance. "Self-help" is a huge section of every bookstore or online retailer. If you **do** the right things and follow the right technique, you will have a full and satisfying life.

However, Paul says, *"Why do you keep on following the rules of the world, such as, 'Don't handle. Don't taste. Don't touch.'? Such rules are mere human teachings about things that deteriorate as we use them. These rules may seem wise because they require strong devotion, pious self-denial, and severe bodily discipline. But they provide no help in conquering a person's evil desires"* (2:21-23). We just cannot be good enough. None of us can ever earn God's favour. It doesn't work. As hard as we try, we fall short.

Paul's message is simple: Jesus.

- *In Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body. So you also are complete through your union with Christ, who is the head over every ruler and authority.*
- *When you came to Christ, you were 'circumcised,' but not by a physical procedure. Christ performed a spiritual circumcision – the cutting away of your sinful nature.*
- *You were buried with Christ when you were baptized. And with him you were raised to new life because you trusted the mighty power of God, who raised Christ from the dead. You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins. He canceled the record of the charges against us and took it away by nailing it to the cross ...*
- *These rules are only shadows of the reality yet to come. Christ himself is that reality ...*
- *Christ is the head of the body. He holds the whole body together with its joints and ligaments, and it grows as God nourishes it.*
- *You have died with Christ, and he has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world. (2:9-20)*

It's not about what **you DO**. It is all about what **Jesus has already DONE**.

It's not about what you do **for God**. It's all about what Jesus has already done **for you**.

*"You are complete through your union with Christ"* (NLT), *"In Christ you have been brought to fullness"* (NIV) (2:10). You can do nothing to add to what Jesus has already done for you. You are saved. You have new life in Him. It is done. Complete. We are saved by God's grace.

In response, in thankfulness, we choose to live for Him: *"Just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness"* (2:6-7). Lord, help us to live, thankfully, for You.

*O God, I am in your hands.  
You know me from my mother's womb.  
O Wise Creator, soothe my pain; heal my body and soul.  
O Good Jesus, you went doing good and healing many.  
Once your hands raised the dead to life:  
    restore my health to me.  
Once your hands gave sight to the blind:  
    take me from the darkness of my fears.  
Once your hands made the paralyzed walk:  
    let me walk again with my family and friends.  
Once your hands were nailed to the cross:  
    strengthen me in sickness and pain.  
O Holy Spirit, Giver of Life,  
    Helper and Friend,  
    Source of all good gifts,  
bring peace and comfort to me.  
Amen.*

### **Sunday, August 27: Colossians 3:1-17**

In the crazy, mixed-up, eclectic First Century world of Colossae, ethics ranged from super-strict Judaism to hedonistic worship of Bacchus (god of wine), and from ascetic philosophers teaching self-denial to temple prostitution (such as the Temple of Artemis, just down the road in Ephesus).

Today some people (including some Christians) make religion into a straitjacket of rules frowning on anything remotely enjoyable. I recently heard on the radio the story of a lady raised in "an evangelical church" where they had "Baby Boot Camp." Corporal punishment was seen as essential to a child's development. Opportunities to inflict it were actively sought out. Parents were counselled to deliberately put young children in tempting situations (for instance, purposely putting cookies on a coffee table in front of a 16-month-old), and then "beating their children" when they gave into temptation (i.e. went for the cookies). This lady is (understandably) "recovering" from her church experience.

On the other hand, some people (including some Christians) say "anything goes – if it feels good, do it – you are 'free'." Everything is permissible in our "freedom" in Christ.

How do we live, wisely and well, as God's people in such confusing times? This is an incredibly practical, relevant question. Paul has given us great theology: we base our lives on Jesus. Jesus has accomplished our salvation. The Holy Spirit is within us. But in practice, what does this mean?

Paul uses a clothing metaphor: *"You have stripped off your old sinful nature and all its wicked deeds. Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him."* (3:17, 9-10) Then, he says: *"Whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father."* In practice, lives as Jesus would live if He were in your place.

Like Ephesians 5 (last week), Paul gives the people of Colossae (and us) very practical advice:

- Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires.
- Don't be greedy, for a greedy person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world.
- Get rid of anger, rage, malicious behavior, slander, and dirty language.
- Don't lie to each other,



- Clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.
- Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.
- Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony.
- Let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace.
- Always be thankful.
- Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives.
- Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives.
- Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts.

Paul also reminds us it's not about ethnicity – no one (Jewish, non-Jewish, Canadian, rich, poor, educated, non-educated, whatever) is better than anyone else. All those old categories are gone. *"In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Jew or a Gentile, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbaric, uncivilized, slave, or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us"* (3:11).

*"Christ is all and is in all"* (3:11). Pray about this. How can we live these principles in our lives? What is God saying to you today?

*Thank you, Father, for all those quiet saints  
who do not argue their theology loudly,  
engage in lengthy debates over complex doctrinal issues,  
or make their presence felt within the hallowed space of Church meetings.*

*Thank you for the saints  
who simply get on with doing the business of the church:  
visiting the sick,  
the aged,  
and the lonely,  
a shoulder to cry on,  
a listening ear,  
and the reassurance of one who cares.*

*Thank you, Father,  
for all those quiet saints,  
who live their faith through their lives,  
in a world that often forgets  
that you were never too busy to listen,  
never too busy to minister to needs,  
never too engrossed in work,  
to bring hope and wholeness into lives.*

*Thank you, Father, for your quiet saints.  
Amen*

John Birch

### **Monday, August 28: Colossians 3:17-4:1 (remember, too, Ephesians 5:21-6:9)**

These passages in Paul's letters to Colossae and Ephesus get some people in a knot. It can sound like Paul is creating a patriarchal (male-centered), parent-archal (parent-centered), hierarchal (power/wealth-centered) society. Would this be consistent with [Colossians 3:11](#) (or [Galatians 3:28](#))? Nope.

Paul isn't saying arguing for a husband-parent-power dominated society. We need to read more carefully. Notice how he begins: *"Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ"* (Ephesians 5:21). In a Christian context, the words "submit" and "love" are two sides of the same coin. Submission/love are always mutual – wives and husbands to each other, children and parents to each other, bosses and employees (to update

the vocabulary) to one another ...

In the Ephesians passage Paul lays this out more clearly:

To husbands, Paul says, *"love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her ... love your wives as you love your own bodies."* (Ephesians 5:25, 28). Husbands are to love their wives sacrificially, doing what is best for them, giving them their devotion, service, energy, and absolute loyalty. Jesus' love for us – the church – is their model. In Greek, Paul has 96 words directed at men ... he wanted them to get the point that marriage involves sacrificial love.

To wives, Paul says only 39 words in Greek. Again, Paul links the relationship to that between the church and Jesus. As Jesus loves the church and lays down his life for it, the church – us – in response loves Jesus and wants to serve Him. So, as husbands are called to lay down their lives their wives, in response wives want to do what is best for their husbands. Understood in the context of *"submit to one another out of reverence for Christ"* there is complete equality, mutuality, and freedom in the relationship.

Similarly, with children and parents – you do the best for the OTHER person. While children are to submit to their godly parents, parents are to behave in godly ways (*"Do not provoke your children to anger by the way you treat them"* [Eph 6:4]; *"Do not aggravate your children, or they will become discouraged"* [Col 3:21]).

Employers – employees ... same thing. Mutual respect and a desire to do the best for the OTHER.

None of these passages excuses the attitude one young husband displayed when he said of his wonderful wife, *"She is learning to submit but she is not there yet."*

None of these texts excuse parents controlling their kids: *"Because I say so and it's your duty to obey."*

These passages are all about mutual love, mutual submission, mutual servanthood, and doing what is best for the OTHER person.

In my pastoral experience, men who like to quote the verse about *"Wives submit ..."* are often trying to control their spouse for their own ends. The parents most likely to pull out the trump card, *"Children submit ..."* typically want to control their kids' behavior for their own ends. Sometimes it's simply stubbornness. Sometimes it's pride. Sometimes it's insecurity. It's always wrong.

Paul has been challenging us to have the same attitude Jesus had. To realize His Spirit is within us. And to love unselfishly, unconditionally, and sacrificially. *Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us"* (Colossians 3:11) ... *"Whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father"* (Colossians 3:17). Pray about what this means in your life ...

*Jesus, you came as one bringing peace,  
and told us to greet people with a word of peace,  
not hostility, not judgment.  
May your blessing flow through me,  
so that when I leave people,  
they may feel approved of,  
contented and tranquil.  
May they feel that when they have met me  
they have met Jesus.  
Amen.*

## **Tuesday, August 29: Colossians 4:2-18**

*"Remember my chains,"* says Paul (3:18). Paul is in prison in Rome. His life is coming to an end.

I've noticed that many people, as they know their end is approaching, refocus their lives on what is really most important. It may or may not be what was important earlier in their lives. Many people, early on, spend a lot of time and energy on their appearance, their clothes, their possessions, their career, their bank account, their vacations, their home, their vehicle ... But as people age their priorities change.

What's on Paul's mind?

- Devote yourselves to **prayer** with an alert mind and a thankful heart.
- **Pray for yourself** and others that God will give us many opportunities to speak about Christ.
- **Pray we will proclaim this message** as clearly as we can.
- Live wisely among those who are not believers and make the most of every opportunity.
- Let our conversation be gracious and attractive so we have the right response for everyone.

Prayer. Thanksgiving. Sharing the love of God in Jesus. Living a godly life, following the example of Jesus. This is all on Paul's mind. As we age, we may sort our priorities better. We may find more time for God.

Paul, also, is connected. Even though he is in prison, he has wonderful relationships with his friends. These people are critically important to him. As we age, we often appreciate relationships more and more.

How come it often takes aging to help us realize that the most important things in life are:

1. Our relationship with God – prayer, sharing our faith, living for Him ...
  2. Our relationships with people – family, and friends ...
- What are the most important things in your life? Be honest with yourself.
  - If you were "near the end," what would be most important to you?
  - Are you satisfied that you are living in a way that honours your priorities?
  - Do you need to rearrange your life so that you do put the most important things first?

"Be sure to carry out the ministry the Lord gave you" (4:17). What opportunity is God giving you today?

*Lord, grant us simplicity of faith  
and a generosity of service,  
that gives without counting cost.  
A life overflowing with Grace,  
poured out from the One  
who gave everything,  
that we might show  
the power of love  
to a broken world,  
and share the truth  
from a living Word.  
Lord, grant us simplicity of faith,  
and a yearning to share it.  
Amen.*

John Birch

### **Wednesday, August 30: Philippians 1:1-11**

Paul prays – a lot. His letters to the Ephesians and Colossians included great prayers. So does his letter to the people in the Greek city of Philippi. When Paul writes this letter, he is still in prison in Rome. The Roman emperor is Nero. The Roman historian, Tacitus, records that Nero had Christians "*clad in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified, others set on fire to serve to illuminate the night ...*" Paul is in a stressful situation! But stress is nothing new to Paul or to the Christians in Philippi.

Philippi was a rough mining town, populated by rebellious Greek miners and pensioned off veterans from the

Roman army who were given land with the understanding they would keep the locals in line. The two people groups didn't like each other. In Philippi, Paul and Silas were stripped, beaten, thrown in prison (stress!), and miraculously delivered. (You can read about Paul's experiences in Philippi in [Acts 16:11-40](#))

Stress. Do we know anything about it? Hopefully we have not been stripped, beaten, or imprisoned for our faith! But we all do face stress in our lives.

Apparently more people die of heart attacks on Monday than any other day of the week. Why? Because for most of us it's the first day of our workweek – and work can be stressful. Life can be stressful. A psychologist friend of mine argues stress is not an outside influence ("life" is not stressful), rather stress is *our reaction* to outside influences (we react to situations with stress). Stress is something our bodies do in response to our situation: our minds race, blood pressure increases, muscles tense. His point is that ***stress is our response*** to circumstances, not the circumstances themselves. He makes this point because we may not be able to change our circumstances, but we may be able to choose how we respond to them.

Paul couldn't change his circumstances, but he could choose his response. He could control what emotion he allowed to control his life. I'm sure his heart pounded, mind raced, muscles tensed – AND he prayed.

Notice WHAT Paul prayed. *"I thank my God every time I remember you ..."* (1:3). Paul had a lot to remember about the Christians in Philippi! When you go through major events (like being stripped, beaten, severely flogged, thrown into prison – and miraculously delivered!) with other people (or sharing good things, "partnership in the gospel"), you have something to remember together! You form a special bond!

When we're in difficult circumstances and we begin to pray, it is good to remember – to remember with thanksgiving – the things God has done in the past. Paul remembered, with thanksgiving, a miraculous deliverance from prison and people becoming believers!

What is God's story in your life? What are the lessons God has taught you? What are the Scripture passages that have lit your path? What have you learned about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit? Where have you seen God's touch and heard his voice? Look, and see how God's presence has been real in your life. Treasure those remembrances. Draw strength and encouragement from them. Thank God for them!

*"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy,"* says Paul. Joy is not an emotion I normally associate with prison! To Paul joy was not the same as happiness. Happiness depends on circumstances – the absence of problems. Joy is an attitude of the heart that is independent of circumstances. We can choose joy in spite of circumstances; it cannot be taken from us.

Paul draws joy from his relationships with people. He has friends! They are his partners in sharing the Gospel. There is something wonderful about family and friends who share a common faith in Jesus Christ. People who can encourage you in your faith, and whom you can encourage in turn.

The same God who was with Paul in prison in Philippi is present with Him in prison in Rome.

Choose to pray. Choose to pray with thanksgiving, remembering all God has done. No one, no thing, no where can ever snuff out the presence of God in your life. He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion. That is God's promise.

*Use me, my Saviour, for whatever purpose  
and in whatever way you may require.  
Here is my poor heart, an empty vessel;  
fill it with your grace.  
Amen*

D.L. Moody (1837-1899)

## Thursday, August 31: Philippians 1:12-30

What are the most important things in life? Some of us don't ask ourselves that question until we receive some dread diagnosis or end up on life support. Then it may be too late to sort out our priorities and truly value what really are the most important things of all. It may be too late to make things right with those we love, get to know our family, or find joy in our relationship with God.

What is most important to Paul? What is his life all about?

Jesus, of course, is the most important foundation of his life. After that? His friends.

Paul is in prison from Rome. Although he doesn't know what the future will hold, it is not looking good. Nero, known for his brutal persecution of Christians, is the emperor. Paul knows Christians have been tortured and brutally murdered under Nero's vicious rule. But he can keep a positive attitude, even about some people who are preaching Jesus out of jealousy and are making Paul's life more miserable.

Viktor Frankl, interred in Auschwitz Concentration Camp, wrote of his experience:

*"We stumbled on in the darkness, over big stones and through large puddles, along the one road leading from the camp. The accompanying guards kept shouting at us and driving us with the butts of their rifles. Anyone with very sore feet supported himself on his neighbor's arm. Hardly a word was spoken; the icy wind did not encourage talk. Hiding his mouth behind his upturned collar, the man marching next to me whispered suddenly: 'If our wives could see us now! I do hope they are better off in their camps and don't know what is happening to us.'*

*"That brought thoughts of my own wife to mind. And as we stumbled on for miles, slipping on icy spots, supporting each other time and again, dragging one another up and onward, nothing was said, but we both knew: each of us was thinking of his wife. Occasionally I looked at the sky, where the stars were fading and the pink light of the morning was beginning to spread behind a dark bank of clouds. But my mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with an uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me, saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look. Real or not, her look was then more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise.*

*"A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth – that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which Man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of Man is through love and in love. I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved.*

*"In a position of utter desolation, when Man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way – an honorable way – in such a position Man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment. For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words, 'The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory.'"*

When we think about God's amazing love for us – ultimately shown to us in Jesus – how can we pray? When we reflect on the amazing relationships we have with family and friends, how can we pray? How can we find joy in our relationships with God and others no matter what our circumstances?

Frankl went on to say, *"The one thing you can't take away from me is the way I choose to respond to what you do to me. The last of one's freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given circumstance."* Pray through your attitude to the circumstances in your life ...

*Father, this day may bring some hard task to our lives  
or some hard trial to our love.  
We may grow weary, or sad, or feel hopeless.  
But, Father, our whole lives to this point has been one great proof of your ongoing care.  
Bread has come for our bodies,  
thoughts to our minds,  
love to our hearts,  
and all of these from you.*

*So help us, we plead,  
to resolve that we will trust you this day  
to shine into the gloom in our minds,  
to stand by us in any trial of our love,  
and to give us rest in your good time as we need.  
May this day be full of resurrection power  
that shall bring us near to you,  
and make us more like you.*

*And God, may we so trust you this day  
that when the day is done our faith shall be firmer than ever.  
Then, when our last day comes and our work is done,  
we will trust you in death and forever,  
in the Spirit of Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.*

Richard Collyer (1823-1912)

### **Friday, September 1: Philippians 2:1-11**

Who is Jesus? Really? Read through this passage a few times reflecting on that question ...

How then do we live? Read through this passage a few times reflecting on that question ...

Sometimes it's helpful to read a familiar passage in a different translation. Here is Eugene Peterson's *The Message* translation: *"If you've gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care – then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand.*

*"Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself. He had equal status with God but didn't think so much of himself that he had to cling to the advantages of that status no matter what. Not at all. When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death – and the worst kind of death at that – a crucifixion.*

*"Because of that obedience, God lifted him high and honored him far beyond anyone or anything, ever, so that all created beings in heaven and on earth – even those long ago dead and buried – will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honor of God the Father.*

Prayerfully reflect on this passage ... How then should we live?

*O Lord Jesus, who came to be poor rather than rich,  
 have mercy on all who are in need and want.  
 Comfort them in all sorrows.  
 Supply their needs.  
 Raise up friends for them.  
 Give them grace to learn of you.  
 Help them always to put their trust in you.  
 Have mercy, blessed Saviour, on all who are living in sin,  
 who do not pray for themselves,  
 and who do not care for their own souls.  
 Turn them to yourself.  
 Teach them to see the things that really matter.  
 May I be of service any way I can to see your Kingdom come.  
 Amen.*

The Narrow Way

### **Saturday, September 2: Philippians 2:12-30**

My parents had a darkroom. In a darkroom you need a special kind of light, a safe-light, a red or orange light that you can have on when you're developing films or pictures. It gives just enough light so you can see what you're doing, but because of its wavelength it doesn't ruin your pictures. A safe-light allows you to function – just (rather than pitch-blackness). It provides a bit of guidance, but doesn't change anything.

We may like that image. Through our life's experience we've learned a few tricks-of-the-trade. We can give a bit of advice. We can help folks avoid stubbing their toes. But we don't really want to change much. We don't want anyone looking at our lives too closely. We like to play it safe.

In contrast, think of a lighthouse. Its role is twofold.

1. Like the safe-light, a lighthouse helps you see what you're doing (to keep you from running into the rocks).
2. The lighthouse on a clifftop is much more active in its "lighting" than a safe-light hiding in a darkroom. Safe-lights just provide enough light in a small room that one or two people can avoid stubbing their toe. Lighthouses, on the other hand, take responsibility for warning people about dangers ahead.

Instead of just dimly lighting a room, lighthouses warn everyone to steer clear of cliffs. They are guides, helping sailors find their way to safety, to harbour, to home. Lighthouses take responsibility for guiding lives, for saving lives. It is an awesome task. But it is also an exciting task, and an absolutely essential one. When Jesus says, "*You are the light of the world*" (Matthew 5:14), do you think He is simply asking us to be a safe-light – or a lighthouse?

Now Paul is saying, "*Live clean, innocent lives as children of God, shining like **bright** lights in a world full of crooked and perverse people ...*" Is Paul asking us to be a safe-light or a lighthouse?

"*Therefore, my dear friends,*" says Paul, "*continue to work out your salvation with trembling wonder, for it is God who works in you to create the desire to do things that please and glorify him*" (2:12). We may be more familiar with the translation, "*Work out your salvation with fear and trembling.*" "*Fear*" can mean terror. Or it can mean the **awe** and wonder we experience in the presence of almighty God. Paul is telling us to continue to work out what it means to be a Christian, to continue growing in our experience of life in Christ, in awe and reverence, with trembling wonder. The great and mighty God is alive and active in our lives. He entrusts His work on earth to us – that's amazing. He calls us to be lighthouses – astounding.

Seem overwhelming? "*For God is working in you,*" Paul adds, "*giving you the desire to obey him and the power to do what pleases him*" (2:13). Our Christian lives did not begin with us; they began with God. We didn't find God; He found us. You didn't wake up one morning, look in the mirror and say, "*Hmmm, today, I*

*think I'd better find God ..."* God woke you up. He moved your conscience. It was His Holy Spirit who put that deep yearning, that sense of spiritual hunger, that passion for God within you in the first place. And it is God who gives you the desire and the power to continue to grow in our faith. God is working in you ...

How is God at work in you? Paul is wonderfully practical! Among his advice: *"Do everything without complaining or arguing"* (2:14). Want a practical way to start being a brighter lighthouse – do everything without complaining or arguing for a while. See what a difference it makes.

There is nothing more wonderful on a cold winter night than the lights of home. Thomas Kinkade, the well-known "painter of light" (and a Christian), inevitably paints scenes that invite us to a lighted cottage or a warm homey-y village. He says, *"The No. 1 quote critics give me is, 'Thom, your work is irrelevant.' Now, that's a fascinating, fascinating comment. Yes, irrelevant to the little subculture, this microculture, of modern art. But here's the point: My art is relevant because it's relevant to 10 million people. That makes me the most relevant artist in this culture."* People yearn for light, the light of Jesus. That's relevance.

We have a home where the lights always burn bright: our church, the family of God. This is home. The lights are always on. There is always family to greet you. There is always acceptance and love.

May we shine as lights (*"You in your small corner and I, in mine ..."*). But may we also shine, together, as lights, as a family, with all the beauty of the night sky!

*Stay with me, Lord,  
and then I shall begin to shine as you shine,  
to be a light to others.  
The light, Jesus, will be all from you.  
None of it will be mine.  
No merit belongs to me.  
It will be you who shines through me upon others.  
Let me praise you, in the way which you love best,  
by shining on all those around me.  
Give light to them as well as to me;  
bring light to them through me.  
Teach me to show forth your praise, your truth, your will.  
Make me preach you without preaching –  
not by words but by my example  
and by the sympathetic influence of what I do –  
by my visible resemblance to your saints,  
and the evident fullness of love which my heart bears to you.  
Fill my heart, Lord, with overwhelming love for you.  
Amen.*

John Henry Newman (1801-1890)

### **Sunday, September 3: Philippians 3:1-11**

If I were to die today, I have an image (that comes from somewhere!) that I would come before the pearly gates (see Revelation 21:21) and Peter, who has the Book of Life (Revelation does suggest there is a Book of Life, but makes no mention of Peter). That imagery may or may not be literally true. Probably, it's more figurative, as John tries to put into words what is actually beyond description. It doesn't really matter. What does really matter? On that day of days when one day, I come into the presence of the Lord, matters?

- I could bring along my résumé ...
- I could bring along a catalogue of good deeds ...
- I could cite my family heritage (I had some very godly ancestors back there) ...
- I could quote my favourite Scripture verses ...
- I could bring some character references ...



Paul says these are nothing. They're rubbish.

Some people think these things earn them "brownie points" with God. Some people use these criteria to evaluate how "good" other people are (or are not) as Christians. Some people teach us being a Christian is about following a specific moral code. Paul says, "*Watch out for those dogs!*" (dogs were hated scavengers in ancient times). Harsh words. Those people who view outward things like family background, ethnic heritage, education, vocation, "religious" activity as the marks of faith have missed the point. All these things, Paul says (continuing the canine image) are literally "dog dung" (*The Message*, 3:8) – the Greek word *skubula* is a bit more "earthy" than English translations dare to write (more of a four-letter word).

So, what does matter? According to Paul, what matters is "*knowing Christ Jesus my Lord*" (3:8). Jesus, Himself, once asked His followers the most important question of all, "*Who do **people** say I am?*" His friends flustered and blustered nonsense about Elijah and John the Baptist. Jesus pressed them, "*Who do **you** say I am?*" Simon Peter answered, "*You are the Messiah (the Christ, the anointed one), the Son of the living God.*" And Jesus praised Peter saying that upon this truth, the truth that Jesus is the Christ, He would build His church (Matthew 16:13-19). Knowing Jesus is the key.

We know Jesus. Or do we? Six years working in construction assured me that many people knew the words "Jesus Christ," but they certainly did not know Jesus.

If you look in a baby-naming book you will find that the name "**Jesus**" means "*Yahweh (God) saves.*" A powerful statement, isn't it? "*You shall call His name 'Jesus' for He will save His people from their sins ...*" the angel tells Joseph (Matthew 1:21).

"**Christ**" is a title (not Jesus' last name!). "*Christ*" is a Greek translation of the Hebrew word "*Messiah*" literally meaning "*the anointed one.*" The Messiah was the promised Saviour who would deliver His people.

We can know all *about* Jesus, but do we know Him? Do we ask Him for wisdom? Do we spend time with Him in prayer?

As Christians, our affirmation is that this Jesus, this Christ, is **Lord**. The first sermon ever preached ended with these words: "*God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both **Lord and Christ***" (Acts 2:36). The first creed of the church was the simple confession "*Jesus Christ is **Lord.***" Paul puts it very simply: "*If you confess with your mouth, '**Jesus is Lord,**' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved*" (Romans 10:9). It's not rocket science. To call Jesus "Lord" is to acknowledge His rule and reign in our lives. By acknowledging His rule and reign, we choose to follow and obey Him as our master. Our calling is to accept His gracious gift of forgiveness and new life AND align our lives with His will.

Notice the smallest word – "*Christ Jesus **my** Lord.*" It's a crucial word. Throughout the story of God's relationships with people, "*my*" has made all the difference. David's relationship with God is expressed, "*The Lord is **my** shepherd ...*" (not "*The Lord is a shepherd ...*"). When Thomas saw the risen Christ, he exclaimed, "***My** Lord and **my** God!*" (John 20:28) ... not "*A Lord and a God!*" "*My*" is the difference between theory and practice, between rumour and reality.

Consider this analogy. I can "believe" in marriage and talk about relationships between husbands and wives. I can sound very wise. But there is a world of difference between talking about marriage and spouses in general (I don't have to be married to do that) and talking about **my** marriage and **my** wife. Now it's personal and it becomes real: my eyes light up when I start talking about **my** wife. There is the same difference talking doctrine about Jesus being the Lord and the Saviour (you don't have to have made a decision or act on it) and talking about Jesus as **my** Lord and **my** Saviour. The devil believes "Jesus Christ is Lord," but cannot say, "Jesus is **my** Lord." When I talk about **my** Lord and **my** Saviour, do my eyes light up?

What matters is that **I** say, "*I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things ...*" What matters is that I have decided to follow Jesus.

What do I need to pray about today?

*Today, I thank you for anything that happened to me  
that made me feel life is really and truly worth living.  
I thank you for all the laughter that was in today.  
I thank you for the life I have in Jesus.  
I thank you, too, for any moment when I saw the seriousness and the meaning of life.  
I thank you very specially for those I love, for those who love me,  
for all the difference it has made to me to know them,  
and for all the happiness it brings me to be with them.  
May I love them as you love me.  
Amen*

William Barclay (1907-1978)

### **Monday, September 4 (Labour Day): Philippians 3:12-4:1**

*"In the deep jungles of Africa," writes Lettie Cowman, "a traveller was making a long trek. Coolies had been engaged from a tribe to carry the loads. The first day they marched rapidly and went far. The traveller had high hopes of a speedy journey. But the second morning these jungle tribesmen refused to move. For some strange reason they just sat and rested. On inquiry as to the reason for this strange behaviour, the traveller was informed that they had gone too fast the first day, and that they were now waiting for their souls to catch up with their bodies."*

Cowman reflects: *"The whirling rushing life which so many of us live does for us what that first march did for those poor jungle tribesmen. The difference: they knew what they needed to restore life's balance; too often we do not."*

*"Doing more and enjoying it less"* is a chapter in Gordon MacDonald's book entitled *Restoring your Spiritual Passion*. He quotes one woman who said of her life: *"I found myself chasing my tail around the proverbial barn. I was tired of being tired all the time."* *"The way we get consumed by a schedule of activities suddenly out of control is alarming,"* observes MacDonald. Does this sound familiar?

In *The Tyranny of the Urgent*, Charles Hummel discusses the tension between the urgent and the important. Sometimes urgent things keep us so busy we miss the really important ones. What is really important? It can be fun and exciting to do all sorts of neat things, but it is often the mundane, day-to-day slogging that we accomplish the really important things.

For example, if we were to ask, *"Is it important for you as a parent (or grandparent) to spend quality time with your children (grandchildren)?"* we would respond, *"Of course!"* Do we do it?

Or we can ask: *"Is it important to help other people? Is it important to share your faith with someone else? Is it important to give a word of encouragement to someone?"* We would answer enthusiastically these, *"Yes!"* But do we do them? Are we run ragged by the tyranny of the urgent?

If I were to ask, *"Are Bible study and prayer important?"* most of us would agree. But does the urgent – doing the dishes, cleaning the house, attending the meeting, watching the game, writing the report, going to the gym, hitting Safeway when it opens Tuesday morning, etc. – take precedence over what's important?

Hold it! Wasn't Jesus always busy? Didn't He live a pressurized life? I don't see Jesus taking a day off or taking vacation. When did Paul play? But think about it. When Jesus went from town to town with his disciples, he went by foot or by boat – long hours of quietness in the countryside. Jesus didn't do breakfast in Jerusalem, lunch in Antioch, supper in Damascus. *"It is refreshing ..."* writes J.B. Phillips, *"to study the poise and quietness of Christ. His task and responsibility might well have driven a man out of his mind. But he was never in a hurry, never impressed by numbers, never a slave of the clock. He was acting, he said, as he observed God to act - never in a hurry."*

The problem isn't that we don't know what's important. We know the issues. The problem is doing something about it. Being a Christian, Paul says, is like a long race. *A long obedience in the same direction*, Eugene Peterson calls it. A lot of people start the race of faith. Millions make "decisions" for Christ. Many claim to have been "born again." But not much more happens. A lot of people want religious experience, but resist the hard work and daily faithfulness of growing as a Christian. As Peterson puts it, there is *"little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness."*

Following Jesus is a long race of obedience in the same direction. We have to keep at it. The race is long. The track may be rocky, full of potholes, even detours. Sometimes we have to push through "the wall." But if we obey the truth we already have, we will receive power to finish the race. We will find joy – today. In the end, we will win the prize God is waiting to give us.

*O God, the Trinity,  
your name is wonderful.  
You purify the depths of the heart from vices  
and make it whiter than the snow.  
Renew our hearts by your Holy Spirit  
so that we may declare your praise.  
Strengthen us by your righteous and royal Spirit.  
Give us your compassion.  
Help us share your love and grace.  
Give us a place in the heavenly Jerusalem,  
through our Lord Jesus Christ.  
Amen.*

Sarum Rite (11<sup>th</sup> Century)

## **Tuesday, September 5: Philippians 4:2-23**

The UK TV series *You Are What You Eat* makes the connection between what we eat and our physical well-being. Paul makes a similar connection between what we feed our minds and our well-being. You are what you think: *'Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things'* (4:8).

Most of us find it difficult to control our thoughts. Like a butterfly, we flit from one thing to another. Without wanting to we find ourselves thinking greedy, nasty, hateful things. Initially we are shocked: where did that come from? Soon resigned acceptance sinks in – that's just who I am. I can't do anything about it.

Paul disagrees. We are what we think. No, we can't filter all the information our minds are bombarded with. However, we can make choices about what we focus on. And we can choose how to react.

Max Lucado quips: *"How can a person deal with anxiety? You might try what one fellow did. He worried so much that he decided to hire someone to do his worrying for him. He found a man who agreed to be his hired worrier for a salary of \$200,000 per year. After the man accepted the job, his first question to his boss was, 'Where are you going to get \$200,000 per year?' To which the man responded, 'That's your worry.'* I'm not sure how helpful that advice really is.

More helpful is Corrie Ten Boom's wisdom: *"Worrying is carrying tomorrow's load with today's strength – carrying two days at once. It is moving into tomorrow ahead of time. Worrying doesn't empty tomorrow of its sorrow, it empties today of its strength."*

Even more helpful are Jesus' words: *"Do not to worry about everyday life – whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn't life more than food, and your body more than clothing? Look at the birds. They don't plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds them. And aren't you far more valuable to him than they are? Can all your worries add a single moment to your life? And why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don't work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. And if God cares*

*so wonderfully for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, he will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith? So don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need. So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today" (Matthew 6:25-34).*

What are you worrying about? Hand it over to God. He is far more capable of handling it than you are. Keep calm – and pray!

*Lord, help us to see in your crucifixion and resurrection an example of how to endure  
and seemingly to die in the agony and conflict of daily life,  
so that we may live more fully and creatively.  
You accepted patiently and humbly the rebuffs of human life,  
as well as the tortures of your crucifixion and passion.  
Help us to accept the pains and conflicts that come to us each day  
as opportunities to grow as people and become more like you.  
Enable us to go through them patiently and bravely,  
trusting that you will support us.  
Make us realize that it is only by frequent deaths of ourselves and our self-centered desires  
that we can come to live more fully;  
for its only by dying with you that we can rise with you.  
Amen*

Mother Teresa (1910-1997)

### **Wednesday, September 6: James 5:13-18**

At the end of his life, the legendary King Arthur says these words (according to poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson):

*The old order changes, yielding place to new,  
And God fulfils Himself in many ways,  
Lest one good custom should corrupt the world.*

The world changes. That's inevitable. And it's not all bad. Not everything from the past was so wonderful. Wishing things would "just go back the way they were before" may not be the best option. It's certainly not a realistic option. Things change irreversibly. And, if we look closely, some changes are actually good.

In Tennyson's poem, King Arthur goes on to say,

*More things are wrought by prayer  
Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let your voice  
Rise like a fountain for me night and day.  
For what are men better than sheep or goats  
That nourish a blind life within the brain,  
If, knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer  
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?*

We may rattle off the phrase, "I'll pray for you," but never actually pray. When there's a natural disaster or a shooting at a school, politicians give us feel-good slogans like, "Our thoughts and prayers are with you." I wonder if they actually pray? (If they did, would they be challenged to deal with **underlying causes** of climate disasters and mass shootings beforehand, rather than glibly promising to pray AFTER?)

James – and Tennyson's Arthur – actually believe in the power of prayer. They actually believe prayer makes a difference. More precisely, they believe **in the God to whom we pray**. Therefore, they believe that speaking with God makes a real difference. Do you?

If we say we know God – the God who created the universe and everything in it, who gave us His own Son, Jesus, who destroyed the power of sin and death – and we don't actually pray to Him, what does that say about our faith? If we don't bring our hopes and fears, our joys and sorrows, our worries and our dreams to the God of the universe in prayer, why not?

When in doubt – pray. When you are feeling glad – pray. When you are angry – pray. When you are thankful – pray. When you are worried or confused – pray. When you feel blessed – pray. When you are struggling – pray. When you are celebrating – pray. Pray about everything.

*"Are you hurting? Pray. Do you feel great? Sing. Are you sick? Call the church leaders together to pray and anoint you with oil in the name of the Master. Believing-prayer will heal you, and Jesus will put you on your feet. And if you've sinned, you'll be forgiven – healed inside and out. Make this your common practice: Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so you can live together whole and healed. The prayer of a person living right with God is something powerful to be reckoned with" (5:13-16 The Message).*

What can you pray about today?

*Lord, I commit my failures as well as my successes into your hands.  
I bring for your healing:  
the people and the situations,  
the wrongs and the hurts of the past.  
Give me courage, strength and generosity  
to let go and move on, leaving the past behind me,  
and living the present to the full.  
Lead me always to be positive  
as I entrust the past to your mercy,  
the present to your love,  
and the future to your providence.  
Amen*

Augustine (354-430)

#### **Thursday, September 7: Revelation 4:1-11**

Way back in April we began looking at prayers throughout the Bible. We've gone through the Bible chronologically, looking at how God shows His love, compassion, mercy, grace, and care through the ages. And we've looked at how the people talk with Him. Sometimes well, sometimes not so well.

I quoted Richard Foster, who said, *"For too long we have been in a far country: a country of noise and crowds, a country of climb and push and shove, a country of frustration and fear and intimidation. And God welcomes us home: home to serenity and peace and joy, home to friendship and fellowship and openness, home to intimacy and acceptance and affirmation.*

*"We do not need to be shy. He invites us into the living room of his heart, where we can put on old slippers and share freely. He invites into the kitchen of his friendship, where chatter and banter mix in good fun. He invites us into the dining room of his strength, where we can feast to our heart's delight. He invites us into the study of his wisdom, where we can learn and grow and stretch ... and ask all the questions we want. He invites us into the workshop of his creativity, where we can be co-laborers with him, working together to determine the outcomes of events. He invites into the bedroom of his rest, where new peace is found and where we can be vulnerable and free. It is also the place of deepest intimacy, where we know and are known to the fullest."*

As we looked to the past, from Genesis 1 through James, we saw we are God's creation. We are created in His image. God loves us very, very much. He loves us so much, He gave us Himself, His Son, Jesus. He yearns for us to know Him, love Him, speak with Him, listen to Him, and enjoy Him.

Now, as we come to Revelation, as we look into the future, we see the restoration of all things. We are in that perfect relationship with God for which we were created.

In Revelation 4, four creatures representing humanity, wild animals (king of beasts – the lion), domesticated animals (king of which is the ox), birds (king of which is the eagle) are all praising God. We tend to think of worship as a uniquely human activity, but **ALL** of creation worships Him. Non-human creation does not worship God as we do, of course, but it does worship Him in its own unique ways (Psalm 19:1-6, 103, 148, Job 38-42). We are reminded that, although humans are different from any other created being (we are created in the “image of God” (Genesis 1:27)), we are intimately interconnected with the rest of creation.

There is another difference between humans and non-human creation, however. Notice the two praise passages. The four living creatures express great praise to God: “*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty – the one who always was, who is, and who is still to come*” (4:8). It is a wonderful straightforward song of praise.

The 24 **human** elders exclaim, “*You are worthy, O Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power because you created all things, and they exist because you created what you pleased*” (4:11). People can express **why** God deserves this worship. The elders see the broad scope of creation, history, and salvation and, thus, are able to praise God in a profound and rich way, expressing **why** God is worthy of praise.

In our prayers, as we come freely and openly into God’s presence, it’s good to do so in wide-eyed wonder and praise. It’s good to simply glorify God. To enjoy His presence. And to celebrate the **WHY** we do this.

Why do we praise God?

- Because He is the great Creator
- And because He is our Saviour (more to come on that)

Today’s reading is a call to simply take time to worship God. God is holy. He is almighty. He existed before creation and will outlast it. And He is the One who delights to love us. Praise Him.

*Your people, a particular people,  
chosen and cherished  
from the beginning of time,  
lavished and loved,  
sheltered and shepherded,  
through sunshine and storm.*

*Restore us O Lord,  
make your face shine upon us,  
that we might be saved,  
and lead others to your salvation.*

*Your children, prodigal children,  
wandering far from home.  
A wilderness people,  
yet never forgotten,  
never separated from the warmth of your love.*

*Restore us O Lord,  
make your face shine upon us,  
that we might be saved,  
and lead others to your salvation.*

*Amen*

John Birch

## Friday, September 8: Revelation 5:1-7

Back in my geography days, I ordered some topographic maps from the Ordnance Survey, the British government office responsible for such things. They arrived in a very official looking envelope with large black letters across the top: "**ON HER BRITANNIC MAJESTY'S SERVICE.**" I wondered if I was worthy to open something from the Queen (not really from the Queen, of course, but it kind of felt like it). I kept that envelope for years because it made me feel really special.

John is in God's throne room. In God's right hand is a scroll with seven seals. The invitation goes out to all of creation: "*Who is worthy to break the seals on this scroll and open it?*" We are not totally sure what the scroll represents. Perhaps it is the Lamb's Book of Life, containing the names of all of us who believe: who can open it so we can receive God's blessing of life? Perhaps it contains God's plan for salvation and a new heaven and new earth: who can open it so the plan can be put into effect?

But there's a problem. No one, in all of creation, is worthy to open it. Think way back: in Genesis 1 and 2, God created human beings, in His image, to tend and care for His creation. They sinned. God called the people of Israel to be His true humanity, modelling His life and His way for the whole world. They failed. It seems like God's plan of salvation and redemption is doomed. No one is worthy. John bursts into tears.

But one of the 24 elders says to John, "*Stop weeping. Look, the **Lion** of the tribe of Judah, the heir to David's throne, has won the victory. He is worthy to open the scroll and its seven seals.*"

Who does John see when he looks for the **Lion** – the King of Beasts? A **lamb**. A slaughtered lamb. A slaughtered lamb standing where **God** sits, on the throne. This slaughtered lamb is all powerful (the seven horns) and all-seeing/all-knowing (the seven eyes). This, of course, is **Jesus, the Lamb of God**. Jesus died – sacrificially – for us, so our sin might be forgiven, we might have a renewed relationship with God, we might experience eternal life, and all of creation might begin to be made new.

*"What John has HEARD is the announcement of the lion. What he then SEES is the lamb. He is to hold what he has heard in his head while gazing at what he now sees; and he is to hold what he is seeing in his head as he reflects on what he has heard. The two seem radically different. The lion is the symbol both of ultimate power and of supreme royalty, while the lamb symbolizes both gentle vulnerability and, through its sacrifice, the ultimate weakness of death. But the two are now to be fused together, completely and forever.*

*"From this moment on, John, and we as his careful readers, are to understand that the victory won by the lion is accomplished through the sacrifice of the lamb, and in no other way. But we are also to understand that what has been accomplished by the lamb's sacrifice is not merely the wiping away of sin for a few people here and there. The victory won by the lamb is God's lion-like victory ... over all the forces of corruption and death, over everything that would destroy and obliterate God's good, powerful, and lovely creation" (Tom Wright).*

Yesterday, the songs of praise from the four living creatures and the elders around God's throne invited us to simply pray, in praise, thanksgiving, and celebration, for who God is. For His love for us. As we reflect today on Jesus – the lion of Judah – the lamb of God – how can you pray?

- Jesus is the lion – what does that mean to you?
- Jesus is the lamb – what does that mean to you?
- Jesus, alone, is worthy – what does that mean to you?

*Thank you, Lord, for helping me see Jesus:  
The Lion of Judah. The Lamb of God.  
Thank you, Lord, for this most consoling of images.  
I was not brought into this world to help you out of a mess.  
You above all are the one who is working.  
Your dynamism, active in nature from the beginning of time, humbles me.*

*You are the force of growth –  
if you privilege me to add incrementally to that growth,  
that is your gift to me, not mine to you.*

*O Lord, I need your help today.*

*I want to care for those you've sent into my life,  
to help them develop the special gifts you've given them.*

*But I also want to free them to follow their own paths  
and to bring their loving wisdom to the world.*

*Help me to embrace them without clutching,  
to support them without suffocating,  
to correct them without crushing.*

*And help me to live, joyfully and playfully, myself,  
so they can see your life in me  
and find their way to you.*

*Amen.*

### **Saturday, September 9: Revelation 5:6-14**

I have only been to a dinner theatre once, but it was a brilliant experience. As dinner ended, the room went black. A flute began to play quietly. The lights came up a bit – you were dimly aware of shadowy figures. Other instruments joined in. The lights got brighter; the scene got clearer. The music became fuller and louder. And you suddenly realized there was no stage – you were the stage. The entire play took place in and around the tables. Actors would interact with guests, asking questions, and improvising by working with our answers. We were part of the plot, the script, and the story ... Of course, some people were a bit uncomfortable with that, but I thought it was fantastic.

In John's vision, the 24 elders – representing all of us, God's people – are on stage. Think of it as dinner theatre. They're falling down in worship, and ...? Holding harps and presenting bowls full of incense which are the prayers of the saints. We are on the stage.

- **Our prayers** – our anemic, stuttering prayers – are here in Jesus'/God's presence.
- **Our worship**, represented by the harps – off-key, faltering – is here in Jesus'/God's presence.

In all our weakness and imperfection, **we** are on stage with the Lamb of God; we're part of the divine drama. No more sitting in the stands as spectators. We are serving God in His Kingdom, whether we want to be or not.

The elders – with us there through our worship and prayers – sing three new songs:

In the first song, the 24 elders (and us) celebrate we are saved by the lamb's (Jesus') death. Why? So we might be "a kingdom and priests to serve God ..." (5:10). We are saved for a purpose. To reflect and share God's love and grace with all people. To model a new Kingdom way of living. To praise and glorify God.

The second song, in which thousands upon thousands, ten thousand times ten thousand, angels join, moves from what the lamb has ***done*** (saved us and established us as a kingdom and priests to serve God), to what the lamb ***deserves*** – all the honour and glory and praise in the universe. Note: all power, wealth, wisdom, and strength belong to ***Him***, not us.

Jesus is not just the source of our comfort and hope – He is the One to whom all our money, time, energy, wisdom, education, position, employment, health – truly belong. Any good gift we enjoy in life ultimately belongs to Him. We are stewards, not owners, of all we have.

For the third song, every creature – on land, sea, and air (and under the earth) – joins in to praise not just the Lamb, but God the Father (the One who sits on the throne) as well. Feeling overwhelmed yet?



Take a moment to catch your breath and step back ... what are we learning about ourselves?

1. We are created to worship and praise God – Father, Son, and Spirit.
2. We are called to be a kingdom and priests serving God. We share God's love with others, live His Kingdom values and principles, and lift up prayers and praises to God for ourselves and others.
3. All we have – every good gift – comes as a blessing from God, to be used to build His Kingdom.

What is God saying to you, today? How do you need to respond?

*Lord Jesus, bless those who bring hope where there is none,  
faith where there is doubt,  
love where there is hatred,  
peace where there is war,  
sustenance where there is hunger,  
water where there is drought,  
and comfort where there is sadness.  
For all love has it's source in You,  
and every act of selfless giving brings a smile to Your face.  
Amen.*

### **Sunday, September 10: Revelation 22:8-21**

Revelation, the last book in our Bibles, ends with prayer: "*Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!*" We look forward to the time when the perfect life Adam and Eve had, walking/talking/sharing/living with God in the garden, before their sin, is perfectly restored.

One day, some day, Jesus will return. We will be with Him forever. We will have that same kind of open, free, perfect life with God, Jesus, and the Spirit.

C.S. Lewis concludes his *Chronicles of Narnia* (fantastic Christian allegories – please read all 7 books some time) with a book loosely based on Revelation. At the very end of *The Last Battle*, Aslan (a lion, the Jesus figure), says to His friends in heaven, "*You do not yet look so happy as I mean you to be.*"

*Lucy said, "We're so afraid of being sent away, Aslan ..."*

*"No fear of that," said Aslan, "Have you not guessed?"*

*Their hearts leaped and a wild hope rose within them.*

*"There WAS a real railway accident," said Aslan softly, "Your father and mother and all of you are – as you used to call it in the Shadowlands (this life we all live in this earthly reality) – dead. The (school) term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning."*

*And as He spoke, He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures had only been the cover and title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before ..."*

God wants us to know that real life has not begun yet; we are still waiting for Chapter One to begin. Now we live in the shadows; we look forward to seeing the universe, one another – and the Lord – as we really are, in all our glory. Now we see struggle through life; we look forward to truly living happily ever after.

*"The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life."* That invitation is for us.

But we are also the inviters. We don't keep this amazing news of great joy to ourselves. We are *a kingdom and priests to serve God* ([Revelation 5:10](#)).

Priests do two things:

1. They intercede on behalf of others to God. We pray for others.
2. They bring God's love to others. We are the hands, feet, voice, and love of God – the body of Christ – in our world. Prayerfully, we serve God as we love others as graciously, generously, unconditionally, and sacrificially as He has loved us.

The good news of God's love is the BEST news of all. God loves us NOW. He forgives us NOW. He gives us new life NOW. He gives our lives meaning and purpose now. And we look forward to *"things that will happen after that are so great and beautiful that we cannot write them."*

*May God support us all the day long,  
till the shadows lengthen, and the evening comes,  
and the busy world is hushed,  
and the fever of life is over,  
and our work is done.  
Then in his mercy,  
may he give us a safe lodging and a holy rest.  
And peace at the last.  
Peace at last.  
Amen.  
Come, Lord Jesus.*