



**October 2023
Readings,
Reflections,
Prayers**

**Who We Are
Being the People of Jesus**

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Monday, October 9: 2 Timothy 3:10-17 (Knowing God through His Word)

Sometimes the world the Bible describes is very different from our own. Other times, it's eerily familiar. Paul's letter to Timothy seems uncomfortably appropriate for 2023. He writes, *"There will be very difficult times. People will love only themselves and their money. They will be boastful and proud, scoffing at God, disobedient to their parents, and ungrateful. They will consider nothing sacred. They will be unloving and unforgiving; they will slander others and have no self-control. They will be cruel and hate what is good. They will betray their friends, be reckless, be puffed up with pride, and love pleasure rather than God. They will act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly"* (2 Timothy 3:1-5). Sound familiar?

How do we live as God's people in evil times? We need wisdom. We need **God's** wisdom.

We can learn wisdom from **godly mentors**. Paul wants Timothy to learn from his example (3:10-13). Paul's life hasn't been a bed of roses. He has been through suffering and persecution. However, Paul wants Timothy (and us) to know that, with God's Spirit, we can get through those challenges with purpose, faith, patience, love, and endurance (3:10). Hardships happen to all of us. But God will get us through.

Another great source of wisdom is **God's Word**, Scripture (3:14-17). Scripture:

- gives us the *"wisdom to receive the **salvation** that comes by trusting in Christ Jesus"* (3:15)
- *"is inspired by God"* (3:16). Literally it is *"in-spirited by God"* or *"God-breathed."* Scripture is **GOD'S** wisdom for us. These are not merely human ideas. This is **God's** wisdom for real life.
- *"is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right"* (3:16). One of Scripture's roles is to teach us right ethics, values, and priorities, and correct us when we're wrong (e.g. see [Galatians 5](#)).
- *"God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work"* (3:16). Scripture equips and instructs us to live our faith in practical ways: sharing our faith in word AND living it out in deed.

In crazy times, we need God's truth and wisdom. We need godly, trustworthy foundations to build upon.

- Who are some **godly mentors** you can learn from? (or have learned from in the past?)
- How can **Scripture** help us know what is right and wrong? How is God speaking to you?
- What "good works" might God be preparing and equipping you for? Who can you share your faith with? Who can you help in practical ways? Pray about this ...

*Give us, Lord, a steadfast heart,
which no unworthy affection may drag down.
Give us an unconquered heart,
which no difficulty can wear out.
Give us an upright heart,
which no unworthy purpose may tempt into moving aside.
Lord our God, help us understand how to know you.
Diligence to seek you.
Wisdom to find you.
And faithfulness to embrace you.
May your Spirit speak to us through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

Tuesday, October 10: 2 Peter 1 (Knowing God through His Word)

The good news is this *"By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life"* (2 Peter 1:3). Through Jesus' death on the cross, *"he has given us great and precious promises ... that enable you to share his divine nature and escape the world's corruption caused by human desires"* (1:4). We are saved by faith in Jesus. That's awesome.

Peter, like Paul in his letter to Timothy (yesterday), is a realist. Life can be challenging. Peter writes more about suffering, struggle, and temptation than any other author in the New Testament. For us, too, following Jesus can be hard. There are temptations to compromise and do wrong things. People can make life difficult for us. We need wisdom from God's Word, *"to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right"* (2 Timothy 3:16).

Peter encourages us to supplement our faith with, *"a generous provision of moral excellence, and moral excellence with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with patient endurance, and patient endurance with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love for everyone"* (1:5-7).

Peter, like Paul, sees life, here and now, as purposeful: *"The more you grow like this, the more productive and useful you will be in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ"* (1:8).

We don't just enjoy personal salvation when we die. **Today**, we are invited (1) to love God, (2) to share the good news about Jesus, **AND** (2) to provide practical love and care for people in need. Throughout the Bible it is never a case of EITHER tell people about Jesus OR care for their practical needs. Scripture always presents these as a task of **BOTH** telling people about new life in Jesus **AND** caring for them in practical ways.

This sounds good, but why should we trust people like Peter? Why should we trust the Bible?

- Peter is an eyewitness of these things (1:16-18). He is telling us firsthand what he has seen and experienced. This is not second-hand information. It's not "fake news."
- *"No prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophet's own understanding, or from human initiative. No, those prophets were moved by the Holy Spirit, and they spoke from God"* (1:20-21). Scripture is God's Word, inspired by His Spirit (2 Timothy 3:16).

How are we doing cultivating qualities like moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, patient endurance, godliness, brotherly affection, and love for everyone? What do you need to work on?

How can we be "more productive and useful in our knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ"? Who can we share your faith with, in word? Who can we help out, encourage, or care for in a practical way?

How can Scripture help you grow in your faith?

*Lord, help us to see in your crucifixion and resurrection
an example of how to endure hard times,
so 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
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 by frequent deaths of our own desires
that we can come to live more fully.
It is only by dying with you that we can rise with you.
Amen*

Mother Teresa (1910-1997)

Wednesday, October 11: Exodus 20:1-20 (Knowing God through His Word)

Sometimes, God specifically tells human authors exactly what to write down. This is how we received books like the guidelines in Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, and the visions of the prophets. We can clearly see passages such as the Ten Commandments as God's direct words to His people.

Passages such as this were foundational to the faith community in Israel. They are still vital to us, today. We "get that" with passages like the Ten Commandments. (We struggle more to see how God speaks to us today through other passages, like the prophets, for instance. We find their messages difficult to contextualize. However, many words in the prophets are still timelessly clear. For instance, in Micah 6:8, God says: "*The Lord has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.*" This is God's Word to us today. We can understand that.)

In the New Testament, passages that directly quote Jesus' words are similar. We believe Jesus is fully God, so when Jesus speaks, we hear God speaking. When Jesus is asked, "*Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?*" and He replies, "*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: Love your neighbor as yourself. The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments*" (Matthew 22:36-40), we know we're hearing God's truth for us.

As you read Scripture, try to notice **WHO** the author is. Sometimes it is God/Jesus Himself. Often it is another author (like Paul or Peter). Does it matter? Actually, it does (more about this over the next couple of days). When God/Jesus speak directly, we hear God's/Jesus' clear teaching. When another speaks, we must appreciate some of their personality and experience will colour their words.

It also matters **WHAT KIND** of literature a passage is. The Ten Commandments are clear, direct teaching for all people, for all time. Some of the other bits in Exodus (like [Exodus 21](#)) are more specifically for ancient Jewish people: teachings about the tabernacle, Temple, and Jewish purity laws. Later, the prophets spoke to specific people in their own specific circumstances. While the general principles of teachings are timeless (like Micah 6:8), many of the details of their message is contextual to their time and place.

- How is God speaking to you through His Word?
- How can you know God better through His Word?

*Glorious God, give me grace to change my life
and to see, but not fear, death,
which, for those who know you, is the gateway to eternal life.
Good Lord, give me a humble, lowly,
quiet, peaceable,
patient, charitable,
kind, tender, and loving mind.
May all my words and all my thoughts,
be filled by your Holy Spirit.
Good Lord, give me a full faith,
a firm hope, and a fervent charity,
a love for you that cannot be compared to my love for myself.
Good Lord, give me a longing to be with you,
not to avoid the misfortunes of this world
or simply to be in that joyful place called heaven.
Give me that longing to be with you,
simply because I love you.
Amen*

Thomas More (1478-1535 [executed by Henry VIII])

(Note: One thing the Bible is **NOT** is a modern science or history textbook. Modern science, as we know it, didn't even exist until the 17th Century. The Bible is a collection of poetry, letters, narrative, law, prophecy, wisdom sayings and more. Each type of literature reveals its own kinds of truth. For instance, the truth of poetry is different from the truth of law (God is not actually a bird, in [Psalm 91:4](#)). But the message of poetry (its themes and principles) is still totally true and trustworthy. Scripture is not intended to be a science/history textbook with accurate details about the solar system and natural systems, or precise records of historical events. It is a multifaceted prism through which we genuinely get to know God, the human condition, and our Saviour, Jesus. As Galileo put it, "*The Bible shows the way to go to heaven, not the way the heavens go*").

Thursday, October 12: Acts 28:16-28 (Knowing God through His Word)

In Scripture, the Spirit speaks to and through human authors. Their words are what God intends us to hear (the Bible is infallible, without fault). But it is told in **THEIR** words: the unique personality and experiences of each author (like David, Isaiah, Paul, or Peter) comes through.

Paul clearly believes "*the Holy Spirit ... spoke to your ancestors through Isaiah the prophet*" but, when you read the book of Isaiah, you see his unique experiences and personality coming through (e.g. [Isaiah 6:1-8](#)).

Authorship and type of literature are important. For instance, when we read Paul's (or other) letters in the New Testament, we believe they are the inspired and true words of God, even though they are clearly letters to specific people in specific places. The truths they communicate are entirely trustworthy and true, but their exact words reflect their dual divine and human authorship (for example, Paul's Greek and vocabulary are very good. Peter's Greek and vocabulary are not so good).

David's Psalms, poems of worship, challenge, and deep emotion, emerge from his personal experiences (e.g. [Psalm 22](#)). Paul shares much about his own personal life and struggles ([Philippians 3](#)), shows genuine emotion ([2 Corinthians 11:1](#)), and even swears ([Philippians 3:8](#)). Peter shares his experiences ([1 Peter 5:12-14](#)). God gives authors freedom to express their unique personalities and experiences.

The wonderful thing about the "personality" of Scripture is we can relate to people like David, Paul, and Peter because their struggles and feelings reflect our own. If the Bible were all propositional truth, like the Ten Commandments, it would simply be a rule book. As it is, though Scripture's rich use of story, poetry, wisdom sayings, parables, letters, and more, it connects with our humanity. It teaches the same consistent great truths – love for God and love for neighbour – through many, many different passages.

Yes, the Bible is entirely trustworthy in matters of faith and ethics. This perfect truth is wonderfully expressed through the unique personalities, experiences, and character of different human authors. The Holy Spirit can speak through people like David, Isaiah, Paul, and Peter in unique ways.

Enjoy the unique voices we read in Scripture. Relate to the various personalities. This **IS** all God's Word.

*Creator God,
Give us a heart for simple things:
love and laughter,
bread and wine,
tales and dreams.
Give us your Word of truth
to teach and correct us
and show us your Way.
Fill our lives with green and growing hope.
Make us a people of justice,
whose song is Alleluia,
and whose name breathes love.
Amen*

South African prayer

Friday, October 13: Jeremiah 1:1-10 (Knowing God through His Word)

Some people give us eyewitness accounts of their encounters with God. Moses meets God in a burning bush ([Exodus 3](#)). Isaiah encounters God in a heavenly vision ([Isaiah 6:1-5](#)). Jeremiah is called by God (today's reading). Paul meets God on a road to Damascus ([Acts 9](#)).

Personal experiences are VERY personal. None of us is likely to encounter God in a burning bush or as lightning from heaven on a road to Damascus. However personal stories are very powerful. They remind us God is active in our world and our experiences in unique and real ways.

God's specific calls to people like Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Paul are unique. But their general call, to live out God's good news and love, is for all of us. We are God's ambassadors ([2 Corinthians 5:11-21](#)).

When God says to Jeremiah, "*I knew you before I formed you in your mother's womb; before you were born I set you apart and appointed you as my prophet to the nations,*" this is true for us, also. God knew each of us before we were born and cares for us throughout our lives (see [Psalm 139](#)).

When God says to Jeremiah, "*Don't say, 'I'm too young,' for you must go wherever I send you and say whatever I tell you; and don't be afraid of the people, for I will be with you and will protect you,*" this is truth for us, as well. He has called us to be His people of good news, too. No matter who we are. He is with us always ([Matthew 28:19-20](#)).

- Has God ever "spoken" to you? If so, reflect on that experience. If not, that's OK. Through prayer, we can always speak to God.
- Thank God for Scripture: we hear Him speak to us through His Word. What is He saying to you?

*Like your disciples at the Sea of Galilee,
we are so often incapable of seeing that you, O Christ,
are our companion on the way.
But, when our eyes are opened,
we realise that you were speaking to us,
even though perhaps we had forgotten you.
Then the sign of our trust in you is that, in our turn,
we try to love, to forgive with you.
Independent of our doubts or even our faith,
O Christ, you are always there.
Your love burns in our heart of hearts.
Amen.*

Roger Schutz

Saturday, October 14: 1 John 5 (Knowing God through His Word)

John writes, "*I have written this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know you have eternal life,*" (5:13). ***The great purpose of Scripture is to lead us to know Jesus.***

The Bible is our authority for faith and conduct. It is God's inspired Word. Its authority comes from God Himself, the Holy Spirit, who inspired the biblical authors. "*Only the Bible,*" writes theologian Stan Grenz, *constitutes the written record of the revelatory historical occurrences, together with the prophetic interpretation and application of these events. Only the Bible directs our attention to God in Christ, thereby bringing us face-to-face with the loving, Saviour God.*"

Scripture is about more than coming to saving faith in Jesus. As the Holy Spirit's Word to us, the Bible gives us a comprehensive vision of all of reality. Scripture inspires us with a new worldview in which God is supreme, is actively engaged in His creation, and desires us to be part of His mission to bring His love and grace into the world. Through the Bible, God teaches how to live life fully and well.

We understand the cosmos as God's good creation. We understand ourselves as beloved people within God's creation. We appreciate the gravity of sin and the wonder of salvation through Jesus. Those perspectives change everything. "*The Bible's authoritative status,*" Grenz continues, *"radiates outward from any narrow conception of 'faith and practice' until it encompasses all of life ... Scripture must saturate all of life."*

And, as part of this biblical worldview, we are "*a chosen people, royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light*" (1 Peter 2:9). John clearly sees we have a calling and purpose as God's people: to help people know Jesus and care for them. To love our neighbour as ourselves in word, and in deed.

- *"Now we live in fellowship with the true God because we live in fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the only true God, and he is eternal life,"* John says (5:20). How does it change how we see our own lives when we live this way? How do we see the world and other people differently?
- Wouldn't it be wonderful if more people knew the love of Jesus? How can you live it out?
- *"Dear children, keep away from anything that might take God's place in your hearts"* (5:21). What can take the place of God in our hearts? How can I work to ensure that doesn't happen?

*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 what I do –
 by 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, October 15: 1 John 4 (Knowing and being God's Good News)

What is the "gospel"?

Our word "gospel" is an old English word for "good news." It is a translation of a Greek word used throughout the New Testament, *"euangelion,"* which literally means "good" ("*eu-*") and "*news/ message*" ("*angelion*"). "Angelion" is the same word from which we get our word "angel," literally "messenger" or "news-bringer."

To use modern, non-Shakespearean English, we could simply ask, "What is the 'good news'?"

John defines the "good news" in a nutshell: *"God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love – not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins"* (4:9-10).

This week, we are thinking about some of the big-picture truths the Holy Spirit teaches us through Scripture, including the truth that we all have sinned, BUT God offers us all salvation through Jesus. Good news.

John, like Paul and Peter, is a realist. He knows life in the real world can be difficult (4:1-3). But John also knows that, through the presence and power of the Spirit, we can not only survive, we can thrive (4:4-6).

John, like Paul and Peter, also knows this amazing good news is too good to keep for ourselves. We are lives that reflect God's love: *"Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God"* (4:7).

- As you read through 1 John 4, what do you have to be thankful for? How do you express that?
- What challenges you in 1 John 4? How can you live it out?
- How can you be "good news" to someone else today?

*I thank you for anything that happened to me today
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, 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.
I thank you for your truth revealed to me.
May I live it with integrity and joyful determination.
Amen*

William Barclay (1907-1978)

Monday, October 16: 1 John 1 (Knowing and being God's Good News)

Do you want the good news first or the bad news first?

Let's start with good news: *"This is the message we heard from Jesus and now declare to you: God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all ... If we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin ... If we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness."* That's great news.

Here's the bad news: *"We are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth ... If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth ... If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts."* We all have issues.

John reminds us our greatest need is to be set free from our burden of sin and guilt. We all feel it. We all know it. Trying to convince ourselves that our sense of guilt is just a figment of our imagination won't help. Explaining it away is not a good enough answer. Attempts to bury it only compound our despair and pain. Blaming others for our problems won't fix them.

We are created with a deep-seated sense of justice and consciences that convict us. We need help.

The only realistic answer is forgiveness. Jesus can truly forgive us (1 John 2:1-2). Completely. Absolutely. Eternally. Without qualification. We can start again, with a clean slate.

That is what we really, really need. That's good news.

Are there things you need to talk about with Jesus today?

*Grant to us, O Lord, the royalty of inward happiness,
and the serenity which comes from living close to you.
Daily renew in us the sense of joy,
and let the eternal spirit of the Father dwell in our souls and bodies,
filling every corner of our hearts with light and grace.
Bearing about with us a good courage that comes from you alone,
may we be diffusers of life and love.
May we meet all ills and accidents
with gallant and high-hearted happiness,
giving you thanks always for all things.
Amen.*

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894)

Tuesday, October 17: 1 John 2 (Knowing and being God's Good News)

We know what we ought to do. We struggle to do it. I find it a constant challenge **TO DO the good I know I ought to do** and **TO NOT DO the not-good/evil I know I ought not do**.

John is blunt: *"If someone claims, 'I know God,' but doesn't obey God's commandments, that person is a liar and is not living in the truth. Those who obey God's word truly show how completely they love him. That is how we know we are living in him. Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Jesus did"* (5-6).

John gives us good news. He helps us see how we can live richly and fully as Jesus did.

- We show the same unconditional love Jesus did (2:9-11).
- We love God, first, with all our hearts, minds, souls, and bodies: *"the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions."* God offers so much more (2:15-17)
- We hold on to the truth. People will deny Jesus. They will mock our faith. But we keep the faith and hold firmly to Jesus (2:18-27).

2:12-14 are a wonderful encouragement to us to hang in there.

- Your sins have been forgiven through Jesus. Good news.
- You know Christ, who existed from the beginning. Good news.
- You have won your battle with the evil one (by coming to faith in Jesus). Good news.
- You know the Father. You are His beloved child. Good news.
- You know Christ, who existed from the beginning. Good news.
- God's word lives in your hearts. Good news.

"You have received the Holy Spirit, and he lives within you," John adds. Good News. *"So you don't need anyone to teach you what is true. For the Spirit teaches you everything you need to know, and what he teaches is true – it is not a lie. So just as he has taught you, remain in fellowship with Christ"* (2:27). Lord, help us to live up to these wonderful promises.

*Blessed Lord, who has caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:
grant that we may hear them.*

Read them.

Mark them.

Learn from them.

Inwardly digest them.

*By patience and the comfort of your holy Word,
may we embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Saviour, Jesus Christ.*

Amen.

Book of Common Prayer

Wednesday, October 18: 1 John 3 (Knowing and being God's Good News)

John writes this letter in circles. He comes back to the same themes again and again.

- He talks about the incredible love God has for us, again (1 John 3:1-3)
- He talks about the reality of sin and the importance of obedience, again (3:4-10).
- He talks about how we should model the same unconditional love Jesus has for us in our relationships with one another, again (3:11-20).

What is God saying to you through these verses?

- About His love for you?
- About what you need to deal with in your life?
- About how you can live well with others?
- What is God's good news for you?
- What is our good news for others?

*Spirit of God,
present with us,
living in us,
revealed through us,
give us wisdom,
guidance,
power,
and peace.
Spirit of God, fill us anew
each day we ask,
that our lives
might overflow for you.
Amen*

John Birch

Thursday, October 19: Romans 3:21-31 (Knowing and being God's Good News)

Like John, Paul recognizes none of us is perfect. None of us is holy. On a spectrum from pure white (God) to pure black (the devil), we are all shades of grey, somewhere in between. We all have "issues" – specifically sin issues. So how can we – imperfect, grey people – relate to a pure, holy, clothed-in-white God?

The solution is that God, in Jesus, takes upon Himself all the evil, all the sin, all the greyness and blackness of the world. He takes the blame for all our sins. He takes the punishment for all our evil. He pays the price to set us free from sin. God, in Jesus, destroys the power of sin and death. Once. For all. Forever.

Our sin costs Him the horror and agony of the cross. Our sin is the reason for His excruciating death.

The good news? Through faith in Jesus, our sin is completely forgiven. Through faith in Jesus, the power of sin and death is broken forever. Through faith in Jesus, our relationship with God is totally restored.

God is BIG enough, and the sacrifice of Jesus (God) awesome enough, that this good news is for EVERYONE who puts their faith in Jesus – not just one ethnic group, one people group, or one nationality. When God in Jesus dies on the cross, the redemption He provides is for ALL people.

What is our part? We accept God's amazing grace by faith. We have nothing to boast about. We cannot claim we are good enough for God. We cannot claim we deserve or have earned even the tiniest part of our salvation. As John reminded us, time and time again, we all sin.

Read these verses through a couple of times.

- Give thanks for the gracious love of God, the astounding sacrifice of Jesus, and the blessing of new life that comes through His cross.
- "*God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight.*" How then should we live?

*O God, Giver of Life,
Bearer of Pain,
Maker of Love,
You are able to accept in me what I cannot even acknowledge.
You are able to name in me what I cannot bear to speak of.
You are able to hold in your memory what I have tried to forget.
Reconcile me through your cross to yourself,
and to all that you have created me to be,
That I, myself, may be made whole in Christ.
O God, make me a new creation in Christ.
Amen.*

Janet Morley

Friday, October 20: Romans 5:1-11 (Knowing and being God's Good News)

In the movie, *Dave*, the President of the United States suffers a stroke. In hopes he will soon recover, his key aides hire an impersonator, Dave, to "act" (literally) as president. As time goes on, the real President doesn't recover and Dave, in reality the owner of a temporary employment agency, essentially becomes the President.

One night Dave is making himself a sandwich, talking with a Secret Service guard:

- Dave: "You know, I've always wondered about you guys. You know, about how you're trained to take a bullet for the president?"
- Guard: "What about it?"
- Dave: "Is that really true? I mean, would you let yourself be killed to save his life?"
- Duane: "Certainly."
- Dave (with a grin): "So, now that means you'd get killed for me too."

The guard is not sure how to respond to that.

Who would you take a bullet for? Who would you give your life for?

The amazing news of the gospel is "God showed his great love for us by sending **Christ to die for US while **we were still sinners****"(5:8). We take this good news for granted. We say it glibly. We've heard it so often. Do we ever stop and reflect on the sheer wonder of God's grace?

*Amazing Grace, How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found
T'was blind but now I see.*

*T'was Grace that taught my heart to fear
And Grace, my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.*

We don't deserve God's love. But God, in His amazing grace, chooses to give His all, His everything, His life – in the most excruciating way – for us. This IS amazing. This is why Paul says, "So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God"(5:11).

More than that, "We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love"(5:3-5).

God doesn't guarantee us an easy, happy, stress-free life. He does promise to be with us through the downs, as well as the ups, of life.

If you are going through tough times, know God is with you. Know He loves you. Know He understands. He empathizes. He has been there. Allow God to form your character through the good and the hard times.

*The Lord has promised good to me.
His word my hope secures.
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.*

*Through many dangers, toils and snares
We have already come.
T'was grace that brought us safe thus far
And grace will lead us home.*

*Oh Lord, give us yourself above all things.
It is in your coming alone that we are enriched.
It is in your coming that your true gifts come.
Come, Lord, that we may share the gifts of your presence.
Come, Lord, with healing of the past.
Come and calm our memories.
Come with joy for the present.
Come and give life to our existence.
Come with hope for the future.
Come and give a sense of eternity.
Come with strength for our wills.
Come with power for our thoughts.
Come with love for our hearts.
Come and give passion to our souls.
Come, Lord, give yourself above all things
and help us to give ourselves to you.
Amen.*

David Adam

Saturday, October 21: Romans 7:4-25 (Knowing and being God's Good News)

- There are good things I want to do. I don't do them.
- There are bad things I don't want to do. But I do them.
- There are good things I want to say. I don't say them.
- There are bad things I don't want to say. But I say them.

That was Paul's experience. It's my experience. Is it your experience? Do we do and say the very things we don't want to do or say? Do we fail to do and say the things that are good?

It's good to be aware of our failures. Knowing we're imperfect can make us discouraged and depressed.

The challenge is what will we do about it?

The key to Romans 7 is 7:25: "***The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.***" Think about all the good news we have read in 1 John and Romans 3 and 5. Our sin is completely forgiven through the cross of Jesus. All we can do is have faith in and confess our sins to God: He will forgive us ([1 John 1:9](#)).

Don't wallow in self-loathing or self-pity. Jesus offers forgiveness and a new start. His death was more than sufficient to deal with all our sin. It is His desire that we repent and be restored.

After this rather depressing diatribe, Paul goes immediately on to say, "*So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death*" (Romans 8:1-2). (Sometimes chapter breaks – added in the 1200's AD – are more of a hinderance than help. It can be helpful to ignore them).

When Martin Luther King spoke his famous words, "*Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, I'm free at last,*" he had a dream of racial equality. It's a wonderful dream. A great goal to work towards. But, as a pastor, King knew there is an even greater dream: new life in Jesus through His Spirit.

This is God's good news: to be free at last, in Jesus. It is a gift Jesus is giving to you, today.

- Will you accept God's gift? It has been paid for by the body and blood of Jesus.
- Will you live in that freedom, allowing His Spirit to continue to forgive, restore, and renew you?
- Who do you know who needs God's good news of love and hope? Pray for them.

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

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

*Do not leave us or forsake us, our Father.
 Lead us safely through all the changes of this present world,
 with an unchanging love for you,
 and with a holy peace of mind which comes from an assurance of your steadfast love for us.
 At last, we look forward to seeing you face-to-face,
 being with you where you are,
 beholding your glory and worshiping you forever,
 through Jesus Christ, our Lord,
 Amen.*

Simon Patrick (1626-1707)

Sunday, October 22: Romans 8:1-14 (Being part of God's Church)

Paul despaired, "I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate. ... Oh, what a miserable person I am. Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?" (Romans 7:15-24). Thankfully, he adds, "Thank God. The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord" (7:25).

In Romans 8, Paul celebrates the good news we have in Jesus: we are saved by His death. We are filled with His Spirit. In modern culture, shaped by the Enlightenment, we personalize this. We make it all about **me**.

This is great news for each of us, individually, of course. It is essential that each of us, personally, put our faith in Jesus. Each of us is filled with His Spirit. However, Paul's teaching is written in plural – we/us/you. (Greek has different words for "you"-singular and "you"-plural. This is all written with "you"-plural).

Does this matter? Yes. It matters because one of the big themes in the New Testament is the BOTH/AND of BOTH **individual** freedom AND **unity/community** in the Spirit. At times in church history, the "Church" has been promoted above individual freedoms. Now, in history, the pendulum has swung to the other extreme: it's all about my personal freedom with no responsibility for/to the larger body of Christ. This week and next we will wrestle with the biblical tension of **BOTH/AND** (not either/or) of personal freedom and community-life/responsibility/unity within the church. Community/church/life-together matters.

Our "sinful natures" (8:12) lead to behaviours like: "sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these" (Galatians 5:19-21). Look closely. Most of these relate to a **me-first**, get-what-I-want, **individualized** approach to life. Actions some Christians take, allegedly for "spiritual" reasons in church – like hostility, quarreling, dissension, division – make this list. Think about that.

In contrast, "the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things." (Galatians 5:22-23). These all reflect a **God-first, me-second, community-building** approach to life. These values – from the

Spirit – build unity, build up the church, AND build us up as individuals in the process, as well.

Jesus prays for us, His people, in John 17. He prays we would be as united in the Spirit as Jesus and His Father are ([John 17:11](#)). His yearning for us is that we BOTH (1) personally have faith in Himself and are led by His Spirit AND (2) live in unity with our brothers and sisters in Christ. This is who we are called to be.

How can I be led by His Spirit today? How can I live a life that is more loving, joyful and joy-giving, peaceful and peace-giving, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled?

*Lord Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, our Salvation:
we praise you and we give you thanks.
We pray your loving kindness supply for our weakness,
though we are unworthy to be your guests,
though we cannot offer you a fitting devotion.
Before you, Lord our God, all our desires are known,
and whatsoever our heart rightly wills is a result of your grace.
Grant that we may attain a genuine love of you.
Don't let your grace be unfruitful in us, Lord.
May the fruit of your Spirit blossom in our lives.
Make perfect that which you have started.
Give us a deep yearning to be led by your Spirit.
Convert our lukewarm hearts to fervent love of you,
for the glory of your holy name.
Amen*

Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109)

Monday, October 23: Romans 8:12-25 (Being part of God's Church)

You are not a Lone Ranger Christian, facing the world on your own. We are family. All of us who have faith in Jesus are God's children, His family, brothers and sisters in Christ, united by His Spirit (8:13-15).

In the Roman Empire, a wealthy man could adopt anyone (even a slave) as his legal child. For instance, several Roman leaders, including Julius Caesar, adopted distant relatives as sons and heirs. That person would become as legitimate a child and heir as any natural born child might be. Their old status as a slave is completely erased and forgotten. They are, in every sense, sons and daughters of their new Dad.

When John writes, "to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn – not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God" (John 1:17), he is talking about a new identity in Jesus, just as Paul is here. We are now God's children.

What does it mean that we are God's children, His family? It means we are united by more than just friendship, common interests, compatibility, or shared beliefs. We are one in Christ. We are blood relations. We are united by common blood: the blood of Jesus shed for us and His body given for us.

How, then, ought we to treat our brothers and sisters in Christ? How ought we to care for one another? To love one another? To seek unity (NOT hostility, quarreling, dissension, division) with one another?

Children can go through hard times. We live in a world marred and scarred by human sin. It can be tough going. A wise parent is always there for their kids but allows them the freedom to learn and grow through struggles, and through making good – and not-so-good – choices. God gives us that kind of freedom.

But we are never alone. God's Spirit is always with us. And we are part of God's family. As a church, we have people around us. We encourage, support, care for, and love one another. We are family.

Jesus prays for us: "I'm not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one. They do not belong to this world any more than I do. Make them holy by your truth; teach them your

word, which is truth. Just as you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world" (John 17:15-18). We are sent into the world by Jesus, to be His body – together – to be and to bring His good news.

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

Celtic prayer

Tuesday, October 24: Romans 8:18-30 (Being part of God's Church)

The Bible says, "*God causes all things that happen*" – right? (Romans 8:28). So, if I get sick from cancer, God is causing that, right? Or if a child dies in an accident, God caused that to happen, right? Natural disasters are all "acts of God," right? Does Romans 8:28 actually say that?

Romans 8:28 literally says: "*We know that to those who love God, God works together all things for good, to those called according to His purpose.*" A couple of things to note:

1. ***This is directed to believers***, people who love God, who have been called into His family according to His purpose. His purpose is we have faith in Him and are led by His Spirit.
2. ***God does NOT work/cause all things to happen. When things – good or bad – do happen, God IS ABLE work good out of those circumstances.*** In a world where people have free will, sin is rampant, and bad things happen – we suffer. God does not cause it. However, He can bring good from it. That is a BIG distinction. It's one we often misunderstand.

We can get a messed-up theology of God if we think God causes all things to happen (think of things like the Humboldt bus tragedy). However, we can see how, out of unspeakable tragedy, God can still bring some good things, from the words of the team chaplain, to the testimony of the coach, to the people who benefited from organ donations. None of these "good" things outweigh the awfulness. It is not even a draw. But out of a horrible situation that could have had absolutely no positives, God can bring out some small blessings.

In our lives, even when our lives are awful, God can bring small blessings, too. They may not outweigh all the negatives. But God can still do miraculous things.

When we go through tough times, we are not alone. God is always with us. The Holy Spirit helps us in our weaknesses. Notice how "family-ish" Paul describes God's care for us: "*The Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words, and the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will*" (8:26-27).

And the family of God/body of Christ/church is there for us. When we're part of a church community, people can help us through.

Don't go it alone. Pray.

And be part of the community. You need us. And we need you.

*Lord, I am selfish,
but you are all about serving others in the name of your Father.
I am doubtful,
but you trusted your heavenly Father to the very point of dying for him.
When it comes to temptation, I am weak,
but you were a perfect picture of strength when the devil came to tempt you.
I am prone to anger when I feel someone is misjudging me,
but you were our example of "turning the other cheek."
In all these things and others, Lord, make me more and more like you every day.
"Here am I, Lord. Send me."
Amen.*

Tracy Macon Sumner

Wednesday, October 25: Romans 8:31-39 (Being part of God's Church)

These are some of my favourite verses in Scripture. When times are toughest, I often come back to this passage. It reminds me God is with me. It also reminds me I am always part of God's family.

1. God is my Father/Jesus is my brother/His Spirit is always with me, AND
2. I am family with other brothers and sisters in Christ, who can help me through.

Being a follower of Jesus is always BOTH a personal relationship with my Father/Jesus/the Spirit, AND a corporate belonging to the family of God/body of Christ/the church.

We have some core beliefs that unite us as Christians, across denominational lines. These are "salvation issues," basic beliefs that define us as the people of Jesus. Our church uses the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada's Statement of Faith to articulate these (many other statements of faith are good too):

1. *The Holy Scriptures as originally given by God are divinely inspired, infallible, entirely trustworthy, and constitute the only supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct.*
2. *There is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*
3. *Our Lord Jesus Christ is God manifest in the flesh; we affirm His virgin birth, sinless humanity, divine miracles, vicarious and atoning death, bodily resurrection, ascension, ongoing mediatorial work, and personal return in power and glory.*
4. *The salvation of lost and sinful humanity is possible only through the merits of the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, received by faith apart from works, and is characterized by regeneration by the Holy Spirit.*
5. *The Holy Spirit enables believers to live a holy life, to witness and work for the Lord Jesus Christ.*
6. *The Church, the body of Christ, consists of all true believers.*
7. *Ultimately Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all persons: either to an eternal presence with God or to an eternal separation from God.*

These basic beliefs, like the wonderful truths in Romans 8, unite us with believers in many denominational traditions.

Many people are critical of the Christian church because they only see divisions, discord, and in-fighting. In a recent study, among those of no faith, Christian individuals are not viewed so favorably, with the top reason today being "hypocrisy of religious people." Christians are perceived as "unloving," "ungenerous," "racist," and sexist," "hateful," and "judgmental." ([See the study here](#))

We need to celebrate our unity on our essentials. Yes, we may have different understandings of some theological issues. That's OK. Let's focus on our core beliefs. Let's show we are Christians by our love.

- How can a passage like Romans 8 encourage us?
- How can Romans 8 unite us, as believers?

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

Polycarp (69-martyred 155)

Thursday, October 26: Acts 15:1-31 (Being part of God's Church)

As Christians we have basic essential doctrines (yesterday or on our church's website: firstb.net/believe). Each of us has lots of things we believe about all sorts of **other** issues. But are these other beliefs **essential** Christian doctrines? Can we agree to disagree on some issues and still be one church? Can we accept that we can have a variety of opinions on many issues and still be brothers/sisters/a family in Christ?

The earliest Christians had a variety of opinions on many issues, too. One of the biggest was the relationship between Christianity's Jewish roots ("*Circumcision is taught in the Bible. If you're a Bible-believing Christian, you (men) must be circumcised*") and the freedom that comes with Jesus, simply by faith in Him.

For us this debate seems trivial, but for many people in the early church it was pivotal. If we take the Bible as authoritative and inerrant, surely circumcision is important? It is taught in the Bible. If we're "soft" on biblical teaching on circumcision, then we're on a slippery slope leading who-knows-where. Can we believe the Bible about anything? Many believers believed a person's position on circumcision revealed their position on Biblical authority in general. They believed Peter and James were compromisers, pandering to popular culture.

How is this controversy resolved? Reread Acts 15.

I suspect there were still many Jewish-background believers who were not happy with the decision (the issue resurfaces repeatedly in New Testament writings). But Peter, James, and the others could distinguish between essentials, like faith in Jesus, and non-essentials, like circumcision. Apparently, over time, most other believers were able to come to terms with this, as well.

One of our sister denominations emphasizes these values:

- ***In Essentials Unity:*** *We are called to embody and proclaim the essential truths of Christianity as articulated in the Word of God, expressed through the centuries in the great creeds of the church and defined for us in our Statement of Faith ...*
- ***In Non-Essentials Charity:*** *We are called to a generosity of spirit that frees us to embrace a wide variety of Christian brothers and sisters — "simply believers" — some with whom we will not agree in matters that are outside our Statement of Faith. Our spirit is one of warm welcome to all believers who share our commitment to our Statement of Faith and who seek to follow Jesus' command to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves.*

I find that helpful. Some of the things that divide us as believers are not essentials at all. We can agree to disagree, respect one another's differences, and still be family.

- How can we have unity on the essentials, with grace and integrity?
- How can we have charity on the non-essentials?

*Oh Lord, I reckon I'm not much by myself.
I fail to do a lot of things I ought to do.
But Lord, when trails are steep and passes high,
help me to ride it straight the whole way through.
And when in the falling dusk, I get the final call
I do not care, how many flowers they send.
Above all else, the happiest trail will be for You to say to me,
"Let's ride, my friend, let's ride."
Amen*

Roy Rogers (1911-1998)

Friday, October 27: Philippians 4:1-9 (Being part of God's Church)

In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, charity. Paul has that kind of truth and grace balance in mind as he encourages the believers in Philippi to "*Stay true to the Lord*" (4:1). He wants us to stay united on those essentials of faith we talked about a couple of days ago (repeated below). But to remain charitable on other, non-essential things. Here are some of the essentials – basic truths – again:

1. *The Holy Scriptures as originally given by God are divinely inspired, infallible, entirely trustworthy, and constitute the only supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct.*
2. *There is one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*
3. *Our Lord Jesus Christ is God manifest in the flesh; we affirm His virgin birth, sinless humanity, divine miracles, vicarious and atoning death, bodily resurrection, ascension, ongoing mediatorial work, and personal return in power and glory.*
4. *The salvation of lost and sinful humanity is possible only through the merits of the shed blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, received by faith apart from works, and is characterized by regeneration by the Holy Spirit.*
5. *The Holy Spirit enables believers to live a holy life, to witness and work for the Lord Jesus Christ.*
6. *The Church, the body of Christ, consists of all true believers.*
7. *Ultimately Jesus Christ will return personally and visibly in glory to the earth; the dead will be raised; and Christ will judge all persons: either to an eternal presence with God or to an eternal separation from God.*

You'd think that in a young, vibrant church like Philippi staying true to the Lord would be easy. It was started by a successful businesswoman, a dramatically converted jailer, and a girl delivered from a demon ([Acts 16:11-40](#)). But almost immediately there is a church fight. Euodia and Syntyche are at each other. We don't know what they are sparring about, but the cancer of their disagreement is jeopardizing the entire church.

How does Paul respond (Philippians 4:1-3). How ought Christians handle disagreements?

Paul tries to put things in perspective by reminding Euodia and Syntyche (and us) of the glorious BIG truths of our faith: things that can unite us, despite our different opinions.

- *"Be full of joy in the Lord"* – rejoice in your salvation and those essential things.
- *"Let everyone see you are considerate in all you do"* – obey Jesus' command to love one another.
- *"Remember, the Lord is coming soon"* – we are part of God's family, together eternally.
- *"Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done"* – find your purpose, joy, and strength in Jesus.
- *"Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus"* – God's desire for us is peace, not conflict.
- *"Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise"* – just do it.
- *"Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me – everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you."*

Paul handles differences of opinion with grace, compassion, and in the love of Christ. Can I? Can you?

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

Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929)

Saturday, October 28: Acts 17:1-12 (Being part of God's Church)

Right after Philippi (yesterday), Paul travels to Thessalonica and Berea ...

- How do the Thessalonians respond to Paul's teaching about Jesus? (Acts 17:4-7)
- How do the Bereans respond to Paul's teaching about Jesus? (Acts 17:11-12)

The people of Berea "*searched the Scriptures, day after day, to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth.*" This was more noble than the jealous, angry, violent Thessalonians.

Whenever you read a Christian author, listen to a Christian podcast, or hear a Christian pastor (including me), search the Scriptures to see if we're teaching the truth. One of the down sides of the internet is anyone can start their own website and appear to be an authority on anything, including the Bible and Christian doctrine. Writing a book or having a website does not make you an expert on anything. It simply means you know how to use technology and market yourself.

We need to be biblically literate enough to discern truth and error. If a teacher/pastor/blogger is telling the truth, their words will be consistent with the whole teaching of the Bible. Search the Scriptures. Check it out.

Another key to Paul's and Silas' credibility is the integrity of their lives. They live what they believe. They live what they teach. People can see consistency between their doctrine and their lives.

One difficulty with online teachers is we can't see if they have integrity. Just because a teacher claims to be Christian or has a good statement of faith on their website, doesn't mean they are walking with His Spirit.

Warning: if a website or teacher is negative about the "church," has lists of authors NOT to read, encourages you to separate from your church, condemns Christian brothers/sisters, or makes dubious claims, that all runs contrary to the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control). In fact, it smacks of characteristics **NOT** in the Spirit in Galatians 5:19-23 (hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, dissension, division). "Right beliefs," expressed with judgement and division, are problematic. The devil has all the right beliefs about God. He doesn't live them out!

The counterargument is true. Just because someone has the fruit of the Spirit doesn't guarantee they have right beliefs. However, the evidence of the fruit of the Spirit suggests that person is on the right track. It's unlikely a non-godly person will consistently demonstrate such fruit of the Spirit.

Be discerning. Search the Scriptures. And be part of a good community you can talk things through with.

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

Catharine Marshall (1914-1983)

Sunday, October 29: Galatians 1:1-9 (Being God's Church)

This week we're continuing to think about "church." We'll read Paul's letter to one particular church, in Galatia, Turkey. Galatia, named for Gauls who conquered the area in the 3rd century BC, was a cornucopia of people. People worshipped Gallic gods, Greek gods, Roman gods, local gods, and the emperor as God. Still others practiced a quasi-religious hedonism with temple prostitution. Most people were comfortable with a synchronistic religion. A bit of everything was OK. Whatever felt good was just fine. There was also a sizable Jewish minority who held to a much stricter ethical code.

Paul was instrumental in starting Christian churches in the area. As a Christian, he emphasized there is only one God, the creator of the universe. Jews would have accepted this no problem. Other people wouldn't have been so sure. Paul taught this one God fulfilled all the Jewish prophecies by sending the long-awaited Messiah: Jesus. Jews would have had serious doubts. Paul went on: Jesus, the Messiah, was executed, but rose from the dead. This teaching would have upset everyone.

Paul goes on to say God is building a new Kingdom. This new Kingdom is one unified people who have faith in Jesus, regardless of ethnic heritage, language, or religious background. It's a Kingdom that doesn't have separate Jewish and non-Jewish (Gentile) communities. Everyone who has faith in Jesus is one family.

For Jews this was a problem. They were sure the Messiah was only coming for **them**. He would save **only them**. The rest of the world didn't matter. If God did save non-Jews, they would be at a lower level of salvation. There would always be a Jew-chosen-of-God/non-Jew-not-chosen-of-God distinction. As well, many Jews-who-became-Christians argued that non-Jews needed to keep all the Hebrew laws if they hoped to be saved. They insisted upon circumcision for men. After all, that's what the Bible says. If you really believe the Bible, you will teach circumcision. Otherwise, you're on a slippery slope of compromise.

In the Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15), the church leaders concluded it was not necessary to follow all the old laws of Moses, including circumcision. That burden, which no one could live up to, was finished. Faith in Jesus is what matters. "*You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality,*" was all the Council commanded (Acts 15:29). In other words, stay away from other gods, practice healthy dietary habits (for the time), and maintain high sexual standards (important in an age of widespread, culturally acceptable prostitution and an anything-goes culture).

Some of the Jewish Christians who argued that you-have-to-be-Jewish-to-be-Christian had come to Galatia. They are attacking Paul's authority. And they are teaching you **do** have to follow all the Jewish laws to be a Christian. In other words, the church is all about being Jewish first. Faith in Jesus is secondary.

Paul is having none of this. We are saved by faith in Jesus. Paul insists he is "*sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead*" (1:1). He is not alone in this. "*All the brothers and sisters (are) with me*" (1:2), referring to the consensus of the Council in Jerusalem. The "good news" these become-a-Jew teachers are teaching is not good news at all. It puts you back under the ball and chain of Old Testament legalism. You are only "saved" by keeping the law perfectly, not by faith in Jesus' cross and His grace. Because you can never be perfect in your law-keeping, you have no hope.

Paul insists we're ***only saved by faith in Jesus***. We don't earn salvation by doing good religious things.

This is counterintuitive. We like to think we earn our way into God's favour. But God loves us unconditionally. He loves us whether or not we do anything nice or good. He loves us because He created us. We can only accept His love, mercy, and grace as a gift. Why is that hard for us to accept?

We may do good things. In fact, we should do good things ([Ephesians 2:10](#)). These are **results** of our salvation, **not preconditions** to it. These flow **from** our life in Jesus. They don't save us.

We, people who believe in Jesus, are His church, His body. We are His hands, His heart, His feet, His arms, His mouth, His eyes, His head for our world. We know His good news. And we live out His good news.

How can we live as His people today?

*How poorly we repay you, my Lord, for all the good things you have given us.
In your majesty, you seek all kinds of ways and means
by which to show us the love you have for us.
Yet we hold this in low esteem because we are so inexperienced in loving you.
We miss the great mystery of the ways the Holy Spirit speaks to us.*

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

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

Monday, October 30: Galatians 1:10-24 (Being God's Church)

Do we put expectations on people who believe in Jesus? In the past, people have expected that, if you were a believer, you didn't dance, didn't go to movies, didn't play cards, didn't drink, didn't ____, etc. If you did any of these things, you couldn't be a Christian. You had to believe doctrines a, b, c ... z. If you believed anything different, you were not a Christian. The lists went on and on. Are those genuine tests of faith in Jesus?

What about today? Do we have expectations/rules/restrictions/tests-of-faith other than faith in Jesus?

We are saved by faith in Jesus. Only by faith in Jesus.

At the other end of the spectrum, some people say we are completely "free" in Christ. Anything goes. Paul will have lots to say about these folks, too (Galatians 5). We are not free to go crazy.

Those who insisted you had to be Jewish to be Christian, accused Paul of compromising truth to be popular. If you let non-Jewish men off without circumcision, with salvation-by-faith alone, of course they're likely to become Christians. That's too easy. Make them suffer like we had to.

Paul is adamant that, if he wants to be liked, he wouldn't be teaching about Jesus at all. He talks about how liked he was before Jesus. He was on a fast track to Jewish super-stardom. But then God got hold of him, by His **grace** saved Him (Galatians 1:15), and commissioned him to teach that same **grace** to non-Jewish (Gentile) people (read the full story in [Acts 9](#)). Paul goes on to talk about the time he spent in Jerusalem with

Peter, James, and other Christians leaders. He refers again to the Council in Acts 15, where Peter had said, "We believe it is through the **grace** of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they (non-Jews) are" (Acts 15:11). We are saved by God's **grace**. The church is God's **grace**-full people. (Are we?)

Note: Paul emphasizes it is **God** who saved him. Salvation was not Paul's initiative or his choice. Salvation is God's gift of grace to us. It is not something we earn or deserve.

We are saved **by** faith. We are saved **FOR** a purpose. We, the church, are God's good news for our world. We are people of good news: God invites everyone to repent and accept His gift of new life in Jesus, by faith in Him. We are not saved to hide away until we die. We are not saved to go crazy and indulge ourselves. We are called to God's ambassadors of good news for all people ([Luke 2:10-12](#), [2 Corinthians 5:16-21](#)).

Paul is saved for a particular task. He begins simply by telling his story.

All of us who are saved can tell our story, too. You have a unique story. How did you come to faith in Jesus? How has Jesus made a difference in your life? How is He making a difference in your life right now? Don't be afraid to tell your story. People can argue theology and philosophy all they want to, but no one can argue about what God has done in your life.

*We have a call,
to be loved,
and to love.
To be shown mercy,
and to show mercy.
To be forgiven,
and to forgive.
To receive hope,
and to offer hope.
To know joy,
and share joy.
To feel peace,
and bring peace.
To be made whole,
and offer wholeness.
We have a call.
Listen ...
Do you hear?
Amen*

John Birch

Tuesday, October 31: Galatians 2:1-10 (Being God's Church)

Who is a Christian? Who isn't? How do you know? Can you tell by the clothes they wear? Whether or not they go to church? How they talk? Not really ... But we want to know if our family members/friends are saved. How do we really know?

For some people in Paul's world, it was easy. If you were a Christian (man), you would also be (or become) Jewish. Therefore (as a man), you'd be circumcised and follow all the Jewish Laws. After all, it had been so since the days of Abraham. The Bible told you so. You don't want to compromise the Bible. (In the male-centric world of the first century, women – interestingly – don't figure into these debates).

Paul, however, is having none of this "you're-saved-because-you're-circumcised-and-therefore-Jewish" ideology. Over and over, Paul emphasizes we are saved by faith in Jesus. Period. God doesn't love one ethnic group more than others. In the Kingdom of God, the family of God, the church, there are no divisions based on nationhood or race. Period. We are one in our faith in and love for Jesus. Period.

Today we understand that. Our own congregation is multicultural. But do we allow other divisions to get between us? Do we think Christians in other traditions are less worthy? In the past, these tribal boundaries have caused many people in society to look at us and wonder if we really know Jesus because of how we treat one another. Can we celebrate our unity and common faith in the love and grace of Jesus?

What's the one command Paul says came out of his meeting in Jerusalem? "*All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I had been eager to do all along*" (2:10). Possibly "the poor" referred to the church in Jerusalem, which seemed to be the most persecuted and most in need (see [Romans 15:25-27](#), [1 Corinthians 16:1-4](#)). Who are the "poor" churches today, those most persecuted and most in need? Churches in the Middle East? In North Africa? In regions stricken by drought, war, and disease?

As a local church, we are part of a global church, a global body. We praise God together. We suffer together. We worship together. We ache together. Pray for our family members – brothers and sisters in Christ – who are living in very difficult situations and dying as martyrs for their faith around the world.

Throughout the year, consider supporting CBM mission projects in Lebanon, Kenya, Rwanda, and other countries that seek to care for the poorest of the poor, refugees, and those who suffer so much for their faith (visit www.cbmin.org or pick up a [Hopeful Gifts for Change](#) booklet at the church).

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

Charles de Foucauld (1856-1916)

Wednesday, November 1: Galatians 2:11-21 (Being God's Church)

Why does the church believe in Jesus? Why is Jesus so important to us? Paul is adamant that we are Jesus' people, His church, saved by faith. His death on the cross saves us. Faith in Him is the one great truth.

To emphasize this, Paul talks about Peter/Cephas (Peter's Aramaic name). Peter is complicated. On the one hand, Peter has been a champion of salvation by faith: "*We believe,*" Peter said, "*that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus*" (Acts 15:11). On the other hand, in the incident Paul refers to here, Peter seems to cave to Jewish-Christian pressure, and slides back into teaching that people must follow Jewish laws to be saved. Perhaps this is why Paul deliberately calls Peter by his Aramaic name "Cephas" (the common Jewish language at the time). Peter is reverting to his old Jewish ways.

Paul has no problem pointing out Peter/Cephas' hypocrisy (it's refreshing to see Peter is very human; he makes mistakes/gives in to pressure/blows it, just like I do). Paul goes on: "*We know that a person is made right with God **by faith** in Jesus Christ, not by obeying the law. And we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we might be made right with God because of **our faith** in Christ, not because we have obeyed the law. For no one will ever be made right with God by obeying the law*" (2:16).

Paul goes on: "*When I tried to keep the law, it condemned me. So I died to the law – I stopped trying to meet all its requirements – so that I might live for God. My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me*" (2:19-20). The Jewish system didn't work. Following rules cannot save anyone. But through **faith in Jesus**, we have new life, real life.

"So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not treat the grace of God as meaningless. For if keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no need for Christ to die" (2:20-21). If the old Jewish legal code saved you, why did Jesus come? Why did He die? There was no need for God to make the sacrifice He made. But the Law didn't work. That's Paul's point.

God's invitation is to discover that when **Christ lives in me**, I really, truly begin to live for the first time. This why the church is all about Jesus: Jesus changes everything. **Faith** in Him changes everything.

How has Jesus changed your life?

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

John Baillie (1886-1960)

Thursday, November 2: Galatians 3:1-14 (Being God's Church)

C.S. Lewis writes, "The more we let God take us over, the more truly ourselves we become – because He made us. He invented us. He invented all the different people that you and I were intended to be ... It is when I turn to Christ, when I give up myself to His personality, that I first begin to have a real personality of my own." How can I turn over more and more of my life to Jesus?

Paul wants us to get it. "This way of **faith** is very different from the way of law ... Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing ... Through Christ Jesus, God has blessed the Gentiles with the same blessing he promised to Abraham, so that we who are believers might receive the promised Holy Spirit through **faith**" (3:12-14).

There is no longer any ethnic superiority for the Jewish people. Through Jesus, God has saved the whole world. Through Jesus, God is creating one Kingdom, one family, one church. Through Jesus, all who have faith are saved. We aren't saved by following rules or rituals. As we shall see, there are things we do and don't do **because** we are saved. But these are the **results** of our salvation; they are **not** preconditions.

Paul wants us to know that, by faith in Jesus, we are "one in Christ," His church. We are brothers and sisters in Jesus. We accept, love, and care for one another as family. Whatever our ethnic heritage, age, gender, ability, income, we are one in Christ. We are all equally precious to God.

One of the realities of family life is that when one member of the family hurts, everyone hurts. When we hear of the sufferings of Christians, we take it personally. These are our brothers and sisters in Jesus.

Christian churches in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, and India are among the oldest churches in the world: they were founded by apostles like Paul, Peter, James, Mark, Philip, and others. They are still our brothers and sisters in faith, today. They've also been brutally terrorized in recent decades. The Syrian conflict has now resulted in the most refugees in history, including most of the Syrian Christian community. Pray for ALL of the Middle East and North Africa. Pray especially for our brothers and sisters in Christ, their witness, and their sacrifice.

We are part of a global church and a global family of faith.

As we approach Remembrance Day, pray for peace in our world. Pray for persecuted Christians around the

world. Pray for refugees and victims of war around the world. Continue to consider Canadian Baptist Ministries [Hopeful Gifts for Change](http://www.cbmin.org) as a gift-giving/Christmas alternative this year (www.cbmin.org) ...

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

Celtic prayer

Friday, November 3: Galatians 3:15-29 (Being God's Church)

Freedom. "Freedom" has been politicized recently. Some Canadians argue we're not "free" anymore. Really?

To be honest, compared to most of history and much the world today, Canadians today enjoy unprecedented freedom. Despite what we may think, none of us is genuinely experiencing a real lack of freedom. But the political and social reality for most people to whom Paul was writing was anything but free. They were mostly slaves, Jews, non-Romans, women, the poor, and other marginalized, persecuted, non-free peoples.

Paul reminds the Galatians (again) that spiritually they were once imprisoned by Old Testament Laws. Spiritually, they were slaves. They had no freedom. To please God, they had to follow all the picayune rules in the Law. If they blew it, they would have to follow more rules about sacrifices/offerings so they might be forgiven (hopefully). They were always walking on eggshells, hoping they didn't mess up, praying they didn't get "zapped" in judgment. They hoped they did enough good things to make up for the bad things.

Through Jesus, we are free from that spiritual oppression: *"In Christ Jesus you are all children of God **through faith**, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"* (3:26-28). Of course, they may still be slaves in the eyes of their Roman masters. But in the eyes of God, they are truly free. They are His precious children. Princesses and princes in the Kingdom of God.

We are also free from the straitjacket of the Law, trying to please God by what we do. And we are free from any sense of inferiority/superiority based on ethnicity, gender, social status, ability, or age.

This is the good news of genuine freedom: *"We are made right with God by placing our **faith** in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are. For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God, with undeserved kindness, declares we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins ... Can we boast, then, that we have done anything to be accepted by God? No, because our acquittal is not based on obeying the law. It is based on **faith**. So we are made right with God through **faith**, not by obeying the law ... There is only one God, and he makes people right with himself **only by faith**, whether they are Jews or Gentiles."* (Romans 3:22-30).

- Let's celebrate our genuine freedom, the freedom that comes from Jesus. That's what matters most. Pray for those who need to know the freedom that Jesus can give them by His grace.

- Pray for those believers who suffer in really oppressive regimes today. Pray that God would protect them. And pray for their witness to the love, grace, mercy, and freedom that comes through Jesus.

*You, eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are a deep sea.
The more I enter into you the more I find,
and the more I find the more I seek.
My soul cannot be satisfied without you,
for it continually hungers for you, the eternal Trinity,
desiring to see you with the light of your light.
As the hart desires springs of living water,
so my soul desires to leave the prison of this dark body and see you in truth.*

*Eternal God, what more could you give me than yourself?
You are the fire that burns without being consumed.
You consume in your heart all my soul's self-love and sin.
You are the fire that takes away the cold and darkness in my soul.
With your light, I pray that you might illuminate me.
May I know all your truth.
Clothe me with yourself, eternal truth.
May I run this mortal life in true obedience,
guided by the light of your most holy love and truth.
Amen.*

Catherine of Siena (1347-1386)

Saturday, November 4: Galatians 4 (Being God's Church) *Time change tonight*

Who is the church? Peter says, "*You are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple ... you are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. As a result, you can show others the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light*" (1 Peter 2, 5-9).

Paul tells the church in Galatia they are saved by **faith** in Jesus. Only by **faith** in Jesus. Now there is no "Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (3:28).

We are all free through **faith in Jesus**. Only by **faith in Jesus**. Even more than that, God brings us into His family as His children. "*Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.'*" So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir" (Galatians 4:6-7). We are princes and princesses in the Kingdom of God.

So, if we are God's children, why would we listen to teachers who try to convince us we must follow rules and regulations, and have to believe all sorts of extra doctrines? Who want to re-enslave us? Those who were emphasizing the importance of Jewish law were doing just that. They were presenting God as a vindictive tyrant, out to find fault with us and – if possible – condemn us to eternal punishment. Some recent Christian teachers try the same legalistic strategy to terrify people into faith in God. If you don't believe what they believe, if you disobey any of their "Thou shalt nots ..." (from reading certain authors, to differing with them on their stance on _____ (pick an issue)), you're not saved. God will gleefully send you directly to hell.

Is that what God is really like? In Galatians 4, Paul draws on Jewish history to help his readers understand that they are truly free through Jesus.

Writing to the Romans, Paul makes the same point clearly: "*When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners. Now, most people would not be willing to die for an upright person, though someone might perhaps be willing to die for a person who is especially good. But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. And since we have been made right in God's sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God's condemnation. For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son. So now we can rejoice in our wonderful new relationship with God because*

our Lord Jesus Christ has made us friends of God"(Romans 5:6-11).

This is the good news of grace Paul wants us to grasp.

We are "Royals" – the King's family, God's family. The "best" Royals (the members of the Royal Family we respect the most) invest their lives making a difference for those most in need: victims of violence, the sick, the poor, those who cannot speak up for themselves. As God's royal priests/children, how do we live that out?

Nelson Mandela wrote that, *"To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."* Our challenge is to live as God's sons and daughters in such a way that the world is a better place because we are here. How can we make a difference for those in need?

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

Francis of Assisi (1181-1226)

Sunday, November 5: Galatians 5:1-15 (Living our Faith) *Time change last night*

God's good news is we are saved by faith in Jesus. That is good news of great joy for all people. Now what?

"So Christ has truly set us free," Paul writes. *"Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law"*(Galatians 5:1). None of us are in danger of that, are we? We don't believe in circumcision and all that legalism anymore.

Yet we do, sometimes, create our own rules and regulations. To be a Christian you have to do (or not do) certain things, follow (or not follow) certain rules, like (or not like) certain music, read (or not read) certain authors, believe (or not believe) certain non-essential doctrines ... Our new Law may even be, *"You cannot really be a Christian if you do (or don't do) things the way previous generations used to do things ..."* We easily slip into new legalisms.

We do, sometimes, make our own little rituals and superstitions that tie us in knots. We must pray in just such a way at just such a time to be heard by God. We have to read so much of the Bible at a specific time or else. We give some ritual a magical power so that, if we break the routine, we're doomed.

Sometimes, we try to bargain with God. *"God, if you help me get through this, I will go to church every Sunday for the rest of my life/read my Bible every day/never say another swear word ..."* We think God will be impressed by our acts of devotion, which we cannot keep.

"We who live by the Spirit," Paul says, *"eagerly wait to receive **by faith** the righteousness God has promised to us. For when we place our **faith** in Christ Jesus, there is no benefit in being circumcised or being uncircumcised. What is important is **faith** expressing itself in love"*(5:5-6). It is about faith, not works.

"You have been called to live in freedom, my brothers and sisters," Paul emphasizes (5:13). But as Nelson Mandela said, freedom is not a gift we are to use for our own self-centered self-indulgence. It is a gift we

have been given, so that we can make a difference in the world.

Some of the Royal Family have caught a vision that their blessings of influence and wealth are gifts they can use to improve the lives of others. For us, the freedom we have in Jesus is a gift we can use to bless others: *"Don't use your freedom to satisfy your sinful nature. Instead, use your freedom to serve one another in love. For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'"* (5:13-14).

Martin Luther King Jr. challenges us *"An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity."* None of us is likely to stand in front of tens of thousands and give a speech like King's *"I have a dream."* But each of us does have opportunities to make a difference in the lives of people around us ...

"Faith," King said, *"is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."* We may not see a staircase of things we can do that will change the world, but we can find one small step of love that will improve one person's life. What small act of love can you do today?

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

James S. Bell Jr.

Monday, November 6: Galatians 5:16-26 (Living our Faith)

The sordid tale of human history seems to one of violence, greed, brutality, intolerance, hatred, and war.

An alternate story of human history has been determined resistance to evil. Many people have courageously chosen to uphold honour, peace, freedom, mercy, and love in spite of the evil around them.

On a large scale, we see this battle between evil and good played out around the globe.

This same battle between good and evil is fought within our own souls. Paul says, *"Let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves. The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions ..."* (5:16-17). How do you find that to be true in your life?

Paul goes on: *"When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God"* (5:19-21).

Paul bluntly says these things are not morally neutral: they are from the Dark Side. Just because it "feels" good and you are "free" from judgment thanks to Jesus' death and resurrection doesn't mean anything and

everything is good for you. Being “in Christ” does not mean go crazy and indulge your passions.

In contrast, *"The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives"*(5:22-25).

In the battle between evil and good in your life, don't give in to the Dark Side. Fight the good fight to follow the Spirit's leading in every part of your life. Because we are saved, we choose to live loving, holy lives.

Ultimately this is not a battle of equally matched forces. When Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead, God decisively won the war. The power of the Spirit, the power of the resurrection – within us – is greater than any power in the world. Be confident. Be courageous. Be faithful. Be loving.

Pray through the fruit of the Spirit (5:22-23). How can you become more loving? More joyful? More peaceful? More patient? More kind? More good? More faithful? More gentle? More self-controlled?

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

Tracy Macon Sumner

Tuesday, November 7: Galatians 6:1-10 (Living our Faith)

Yesterday we read: *"The Holy Spirit **produces** this kind of **fruit** in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control"*(Galatians 5:22-23).

Paul carries on with this gardening metaphor: *"You will always harvest what you plant. Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit. So let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don't give up. Therefore, whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone – especially to those in the family of faith"*(6:7-10).

Paul gives some practical examples (6:1-6) of what this might look like.

*"Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives"*Paul writes (5:25). Paul is emphasizing we are saved by God's grace. Then, we're empowered by God's grace. We live out God's grace. We don't do good things so God will like us. We do good things because God's Holy Spirit is at work in us. The One who is within us – the Holy Spirit – is evident in how we live.

Anything good we do is not done because we're so wonderful. Anything good results from God's Spirit working in and through us, inspiring us, guiding us, and empowering us. It is all about God. Not us.

*"The Holy Spirit illuminates the minds of people, makes us yearn for God, and takes spiritual truth and makes it understandable to us"*writes Billy Graham. The Spirit is the One who deserves all the credit.

Expressing this negatively, Corrie Ten Boom writes, *"Trying to do the Lord's work in your own strength is the*

most confusing, exhausting, and tedious of all work. But when you are filled with the Holy Spirit, then the ministry of Jesus just flows out of you."

Theologian J.I. Packer explains it this way: *"The Christian's life in all its aspects – intellectual and ethical, devotional and relational, upsurging in worship and outgoing in witness – is supernatural; only the Spirit can initiate and sustain it. So apart from him, not only will there be no lively believers and no lively congregations, there will be no believers and no congregations at all."*

If we try to explain everything, accomplish everything, and be everything on our own, we can never be more than a shadow of who we can be if we allow the Spirit to move in our lives. Try walking with the Spirit today.

- Ask Him to lead you.
- Ask Him to open your eyes to see possibilities.
- Ask Him to guide your conversations.
- Ask Him to give you a deeper appreciation of the beauty around you.
- Ask Him to help you see how you can help His Kingdom come and His will be done today ...

A Workday Prayer (adapt to your own circumstances ...)

Lord Jesus, as I enter this workplace, I bring your presence with me.

*I speak your peace, your grace, and your perfect order
into the atmosphere of this office.*

*I acknowledge your lordship over all that will be spoken, thought,
decided and accomplished within these walls.*

Lord Jesus, I thank you for the gifts you have deposited in me.

I do not take them lightly, but commit to use them responsibly and well.

Give me a fresh supply of truth and love on which to draw as I do my job.

Anoint my creativity, my ideas, my energy

so that even my smallest task may bring you honor.

Lord, when I am confused, guide me.

When I am weary, energize me.

Lord, when I am burned out, infuse me with the light of your Holy Spirit.

May the work that I do and the way I do it bring

hope, life, and courage to all I come in contact with today.

And, Lord, even in this day's most stressful moment, may I rest in you.

Amen.

Author unknown

Wednesday, November 8: Galatians 6:11-18 (Living our Faith)

What is the most important thing in your life? Why?

This is how Paul answers that question: *"As for me, may I never boast about anything except **the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ**. Because of that cross, my interest in this world has been crucified, and the world's interest in me has also died. It doesn't matter whether we have been circumcised or not. **What counts is whether we have been transformed into a new creation**"(6:14-15).*

For Paul, his relationship to Jesus is the important thing. His identity, as a follower of Jesus, is first and foremost. Nothing else comes close. His occupation as a tentmaker is way down the list of ways in which he defined himself. His education, a doctorate in Jewish theology, is irrelevant. His dress/appearance? He never talks about it. His wealth? Possessions? Pension? Never mentioned.

What Paul really wants us to know is that his life only finds meaning, purpose, and identity as a person whom God loves, for whom Jesus died, and in whom the Spirit lives. He is a new person because of Jesus.

How do you define yourself? In terms of your job? Your education? What you wear? What you own? Does

any of that really matter? Does any of it make you unique? Being humble and honest, millions of people have a better job, education, clothing, and other stuff than we do ...

But God loves **you**. He died for **you**. His Spirit fills **you**. **You** are His precious child – a prince or princess in His Kingdom. That is who you really are. God wants you to know this. He doesn't want you to become conceited. He does want you to know who you are. You are a new person because of Jesus.

It's only from a strong sense of self-identity as God's beloved children that we can effectively love others. God wants us to know His love, so His love can then overflow our lives to be a blessing to people near us. When we know who we are, as God's beloved, we can reflect His love to those around us. Paradoxically, the more we appreciate God's love for us, the more love we have to share with others (conversely, the less secure we are about God's love for us, the more self-absorbed and less loving we may be).

Scottish theologian, William Barclay, wrote, *"Love always involves responsibility, and love always involves sacrifice. And we do not really love Christ unless we are prepared to face His task and to take up His Cross."* May the Lord help us to love Him and love our neighbours in simple – and profound – ways ...

*O Lord, with me there is always doubt.
With you there never is.
The darkness was long, too long,
and it all came from within me, from my doubts and fears,
from me, looking inward, seeking self.
Your light was there, guiding and correcting,
and pointing me to your Son, his goodness, holiness, and pure light.
Please, shine in my heart, with your most precious Light.
Send your holy Spirit to turn on the light
when I hear promises in your Word –
even when I hear what I've heard so many times before.
Keep shining and enlightening.
Restore to me the joy.
Amen*

Thursday, November 9: Acts 2:40-47 (Living our Faith)

These verses give us the first real picture of "church":

- There is teaching/learning (inspiring people to grow in faith, knowledge, and wisdom).
- There is fellowship (enfolding people into a community of care, compassion, grace, and love).
- There is breaking of bread (worshiping and celebrating "being together" as the people of God).
- There is mission (talking about faith AND providing tangible help to those in practical need).
- There is prayer – lots of prayer ('nuff said).

Over the generations, church has morphed and changed, but those five basic elements remain. The church may have become more than this, but it can never be less.

1. Lifelong **learning** is critical, so we remain true to the teachings, values, and principles of Jesus so we can speak relevantly in and to our culture, and not just absorb the latest cultural craze.
2. **Fellowship**, deep caring for one another defines who we are. We live God's Kingdom values of mercy and compassion, modeled in the early church in very practical, financial ways.
3. **Worship** shapes us. This is symbolized by the ordinance of Communion, but is rich and deep as we give thanks to, celebrate, and praise our Creator, Saviour, and the Spirit who is within us.
4. **Mission**. We care for people outside and inside the community. We want people to know Jesus. And we want to alleviate suffering, seek justice, and see God's Kingdom come and will be done.
5. **Prayer** happens as we listen to God speaking to us and lifting our **A**doration, **C**onfession, **T**hanksgiving, and **S**upplication (needs) to God (note the helpful acronym **ACTS**, to help us have balanced prayers). In prayer we open ourselves up to God's will for us and bring our issues to Him.

It's interesting that "evangelism" is not listed and yet *"each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved."* As the early Christians simply lived their faith, others were drawn to the church.

Evangelism or mission was not a programme. It is simply who they are. They live their faith. They talk about their faith. And, by their words and example, people are drawn to Jesus as to a magnet.

How can we live our faith so people see our faith? *"They'll know we are Christians by our love ..."* Do they? How can we model that love? How does the Acts 2 description of church inspire us? Challenge us?

Pray for our church, that we might be this kind of a missional, loving, worshipping, learning – and PRAYING – community. Pray for yourself, that you might be the person God created you to be.

Abraham Lincoln once said, *"I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had absolutely no other place to go."* When you face more than you can handle – and you will – pray. You have no other place to go. Pray for power equal to your task.

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

Augustine (354-430)

Friday, November 10: Acts 8:4-40 (Living our Faith)

Peter and John lay hands on people and pray they would receive the Holy Spirit. Simon senses an entrepreneurial opportunity. He wants that super-power to add to his bag of tricks. He pulls out his wallet excitedly, *"Sell me your secret. Show me how you did that. Name your price."* He isn't concerned about God. He sees a lucrative business proposition. After all, the financial bottom line is what matters most. Right?

Peter answers: *"May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money."* or, we could literally say (as Eugene Peterson translates it): *"To hell with your money. And you along with it. You can't buy God's gift."*

Simon completely side-steps Peter's challenge to repent. He asks Peter to pray nothing bad would happen to him. But Simon doesn't do the one thing he needs to do. He doesn't see the error of his ways. He doesn't repent. He doesn't put his faith in Jesus. Simon is still in charge of Simon. He says he believes, but he receives no joy and no blessing from his "faith." He won't allow Jesus to change his heart. He is left the same old Simon in a city which now sees him as the charlatan he is. It's a sad story.

It is possible to believe all the right things about Jesus and not know Jesus, personally. It is also possible to want His Spirit's power for our own purposes, but not be willing to allow Him to change us. Knowing and believing all the right stuff leaves us empty if we don't invite the Spirit to fill our hearts and shape our souls.

The second person we are introduced to in Acts 8 is an Ethiopian eunuch. Luke tells us he is the Minister of Finance for Queen Candice of Ethiopia. Somehow, he has come to believe in the one true God (an African convert to Judaism). Now he is returning home after a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Apparently, however, the services at the temple have not met his spiritual hunger. As he rides along, he is reading and trying to make sense of a passage from the prophet Isaiah.

This Ethiopian, like Simon, apparently knows a lot about religion. He has studied the Jewish Scriptures enough to be convinced God is real. He has come to love God because he believes what he's reading is true. But he feels there must be something more. It has no "life" to it. As Philip tells him about Jesus, everything comes together. This powerful man discovers the life, meaning, and purpose he's searching for.

"They came to some water and the eunuch said, 'Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?' And Philip said, 'If you believe with all your heart, you may.' The eunuch answered, 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.' And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him."

The Ethiopian understands what Simon never does. Belief is not just a matter of the head; it's also a matter of the heart. Jesus changes us. Completely. Simon goes away as the same old Simon. The Ethiopian, who believes with all his heart, *"went on his way rejoicing."* He is a new person.

For faith to be real, yes, you do have to know, intellectually, that Jesus Christ came, lived, died for our sins, and rose from the grave. It is important to know He's coming again.

For faith to be real you also must know that Christ came for **you**. He died for **you**. He will come again for **you**. More than that, you need to experience the power of His Holy Spirit at work in **your** life **today**.

It's a matter of letting Him into your heart, not just your head. How can you live that way today?

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

John Wesley (1707-1788)

Saturday, November 11: Acts 16:6-15 (Living our Faith)

Today is Remembrance Day. We remember those from the past who fought and died for our freedoms. We think and pray for those, today, who protect our nation, serve as peacekeepers around the world, and risk their lives for us. We pray for those who seek to make wise decisions and lead in conflict zones around the world. And we pray for those who suffer because of war, conflict, and violence in many nations.

How can we be people of Good News in these times?

We know we're supposed to share our faith. We know we ought to be "missional." But practically what does

that mean? How do we share our faith?

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

One woman, named Lydia, listens intently. *"The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message."* She listens to Paul talking about what God is doing in his life. How he came to believe. How God kept him safe and is guiding him. The **Holy Spirit** impresses upon her heart that this same God wants to be her Saviour. And she believes. She and others who believe are baptized.

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

Notice what does NOT happen in this account:

- Paul is not preaching. Lydia and her companions become Christians when someone takes the time to speak with them one-on-one/in a small group. They become Christians when people who know God share their personal experiences of who God is to them. This is humbling for preachers.
- There is no rush. Paul and his friends spend time with these people. This is more than a five-minute conversation.
- Paul does not convert anyone. The text makes it clear Paul's words do not lead these people to faith in Jesus. *"The Lord opened her heart ..."* The Spirit is the One who leads people to faith in Jesus.

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

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

We may know Jesus and have experiences with God, but we're hesitant to talk about them for many reasons (what are your reasons?) Pray. Perhaps we don't know when it's appropriate to share our faith – pray. We don't know who to share our faith with – pray. We don't know what to say – pray.

It sounds trite, but prayer helps. C.S. Lewis comments, *"I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless. I pray because the need flows out of me all the time – waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God – it changes me."*

After you have prayed, do it. We can always find reasons NOT to speak to someone else. But when you find yourself starting to think of excuses ... DON'T.

Talking about our faith in Jesus can be difficult, but it becomes more natural with time. As you share your experience of God with someone, your words become part of that person's life. They may believe right away or not. It may take a long while to sink in. That's God's responsibility. You've made an eternal contribution to someone's life.

Your words may make all the difference in the world to that person. And then they tell two people. Who each tell two people. Who each tell two people ... You get the picture.

Pray that God would give each of us the wisdom, courage, and opportunity to share His love and grace ...

*God of wisdom and grace,
we pray for all who are working for peace in tangled conflicts around the world today.
For international leaders holding a thread of control,
for the politicians holding a thread of power,
for the religious leaders holding a thread of authority,
for the fighters holding a thread of influence,
and the citizens clinging to a thread of hope.
Bring unity through the untangled order of justice.
Bring reconciliation through truthful dialogue.
Bring new life through patient diplomacy,
determined mediation and courageous peace-making.*

*We pray for those damaged by the fighting in countries around the globe.
To the wounded and injured: Come Lord Jesus.
To the terrified who are living in shock: Come Lord Jesus
To the hungry and homeless, refugee and exile: Come Lord Jesus
To those bringing humanitarian aid: Give protection Lord Jesus
To those administering medical assistance: Give protection Lord Jesus.
To those offering counsel and care: Give protection Lord Jesus.*

*For all making the sacrifice of love:
Give the strength of your Spirit and the joy of your comfort.
In the hope of Christ we pray.
Amen.*

Sunday, November 12: Acts 16:16-34 (Being and bringing Good News to all people)

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

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

Another story is about C.S. Lewis, a professor at Oxford University. During a conference on comparative religions, leading experts debated what belief was unique to Christianity, if any. They began eliminating possibilities. Other religions had versions of gods appearing in human form. Other religions believed in life after death. The story goes that C.S. Lewis wandered in and asked, "*What's the rumpus about?*" When he heard their dilemma, Lewis responded, "*Oh, that's easy. It's grace.*"

Grace is simply love, free of charge, no strings attached: Jesus loves you, just as you are. This is the good news Paul shares (Acts 16:31).

This is the unique message of Jesus.

It is nice to say God loves me, but He doesn't know me, does He? That may have been what the jailer was thinking. Jailers in those days were not known for being "good" or "nice" people – rather the opposite. They were rough, crude, violent bouncers. But Paul has credibility. He knows, firsthand, about God's grace. Paul was one of those responsible for the murder of Stephen. Paul was responsible for Christians being beaten, thrown into prison, and worse.

God's grace came to Paul, with all his violent, intolerant, cruel, and merciless past. Paul could share that story with the jailer.

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

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

AFTER we are saved, the Spirit does challenge us to deal with issues in our lives. These are changes we make in obedience to God's Spirit, **AFTER we trust in Jesus**.

The good news is simply this: "Jesus loves you." You are saved by God's amazing grace.

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

That's the good news of great joy for all people. God loves you.

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

Pray for them.

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

James S. Bell Jr.