

August 2025

What Does the Lord Require?

**Hearing God through
the Minor Prophets 2**



**Lethbridge
First Baptist
Church**

info@firstb.net

www.firstb.net

For a daily email of these devotions (with Scripture included), please email info@firstb.net

Sunday, July 27: Micah 1:1-9

What do we do with the prophets? More than a quarter of our Bibles is written by the prophets (Isaiah through Malachi), but we rarely read them. Their language can be challenging. They can be depressing. We often skip over the prophets, zooming on to the gospels.

But Jesus quotes the prophets often. He describes Himself as the fulfillment of the prophets' messages. He uses the prophets to highlight the issues of His day.

The prophets help us see how God wants us to live. They help us see what "sin" is. They help us understand why we need a Saviour.

The two big themes in the prophets are:

1. ***Faithfulness to and worship of the one true God.*** We can easily choose to trust in other things than God: wealth, possessions, power, pleasure. The prophets call us back to God.
2. ***Justice.*** When we love and worship God, the One who is holy and just, we value His justice. This means more than a good legal system. Biblical justice means we live with honesty and integrity in our relationships, righteousness in our living, care for the poor, forgiveness, and compassion.

Micah (whose name means, "Who is like Yahweh") is a country boy who sees the crime and corruption in the land. He calls people back to faithfulness to God. He and speaks out against the oppression of the poor, suffering, and foreigners.

We understand the prophets' challenge to love God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. We struggle with their obsession with personal and national integrity, care for the poor, advocacy for the vulnerable, and compassion for refugees and foreigners.

We struggle with the truth that God is just as concerned about how we love our neighbour in tangible ways. We love God. Loving the poor and refugees is much more difficult.

Jesus is asked, *"Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?"* 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).

For God, godly living is **BOTH loving God** wholeheartedly **AND loving our neighbour**. It is not an EITHER/OR. It is BOTH/AND.

How can I do both today?

- How can I love God with all my heart, mind, soul, and strength today?
- How can I love my neighbour as myself, today?

*You said: "The Spirit of God has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor."
You sat with the outcast, shared with the needy and stood by the side of the lowly:
This is your justice, Jesus.*

*You said: "God sent me to proclaim freedom for those in prison."
You offered forgiveness to those who could not forgive themselves,
you broke that which bound and constrained and brought the relief of liberation:
This is your justice, Jesus.*

*You said: "God sent me to proclaim the recovery of sight for the blind."
You gently opened eyes that were tight shut,
poured light into dark places and made the sick whole:
This is your justice, Jesus.*

*You said: "God sent me to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."
You shared your treasures with women,
did not judge others and helped people believe in a God of hope:
This is your justice, Jesus.*

*You are the Christ – the grace of God made flesh for us.
Help us to be your people of justice, Jesus.
Amen*

David Warrington

Monday, July 28: Micah 2:1-3

Has Micah depressed you yet? So far, he has had only bad news for the people of Samaria (the northern kingdom of Israel) and Jerusalem (the southern kingdom of Judah).

Micah helps us understand why God is so angry with His people.

God's people were blessed to be a blessing. Back in Genesis 12:2, God says to Abram, *"I will make you into a great nation. **I will bless you** and make you famous, **and you will be a blessing to others.**"*

God's call on the people of Israel was that they were to be His people. And, as His people, bearing the image of God, they were to love, care for, and bring His good news into all the earth.

They failed miserably. They become evil. Their horrible actions will be their downfall. During Micah's lifetime the northern kingdom of Israel will be conquered. Shortly after his death, Judah will capitulate. In this case, these defeats and exile are God's judgement upon God's people for their sins.

One theme in Micah is **God takes sin seriously**. We know that when we, **personally**, sin, it hurts others and us. We need to confess it to God. We need to change our ways (repent). And, if we have hurt someone else, we need to confess, apologise, and try to rebuild the relationship.

"If we claim we have no sin, we are fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness" (1 John 1:8-9).

Is there anything in your life that's "sin" in God's eyes? Will you confess it? Will you do what you need to do to make things right?

The prophets also highlight that when **we, as a community/nation, sin** we must confess it to God. We need to change our **collective ways** (repent). If we have hurt someone or a group, we need to confess, apologise, and try to rebuild the relationship.

It is biblical and good for us to help those who are poor. It is biblical and good for us to welcome refugees. It is biblical and good for us as a nation to apologise to indigenous people for the evils of residential schools and help First Nations become thriving communities. This is the justice God calls us to in the prophets.

Is there anything in our society that is “sin” in God’s eyes? Talk with God about it. Is there anything you can do to begin to make things right?

*Good morning heavenly Father,
good morning Lord Jesus,
good morning Holy Spirit.*

*Heavenly Father, I worship you as the creator and sustainer of the universe.
Lord Jesus, I worship you, Savior and Lord of the world.
Holy Spirit, I worship you, sanctifier of the people of God.*

Glory to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit.

*Heavenly Father, I pray that I may live this day in your presence
and please you more and more.
Lord Jesus, I pray that this day I may take up my cross and follow you.
Holy Spirit, I pray that this day you will fill me with yourself
and cause your fruit to ripen in my life:
love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness,
faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.
Holy, blessed and glorious Trinity, three persons in one God,
have mercy upon me.
Amen.*

John Stott

Tuesday, July 29: Micah 2:4-11

I read the news this morning. It’s business as usual.

- Some political leaders are embroiled in personal ethical scandals.
- Nations, businesses, and oligarchs are obsessed with “them first” – whatever will bring them the most economic gain, whatever the cost to others, is best. No one else matters.
- News stories, lawsuits, and legislation highlight that abuse and inequalities based on gender, race, age, and ability are not just common, but can be part of a political platform.
- Children, women, elderly, and refugees are victimized by political agendas and military conflicts.
- Those who speak out about greed, corruption, and lies are “bad people” with “fake news.”

Not much has changed since Micah spoke to his people in 2700 years ago!

- The wealthy/powerful covet fields and grab them, find homes and take them.
- They bully their neighbor and their families, valuing people only for what they can get from them.
- They rob unsuspecting people out for an evening stroll.
- They take coats off the backs of the vulnerable, like soldiers who plunder the defenseless.
- They drive widows out of their homes.
- They make victims of poor children, leaving them vulnerable to violence and vice.
- “Don’t preach about this evil,” say the leaders. “Preach things that support the wealthy/powerful.”

This sounds eerily familiar in 2025, doesn't it?

The message people back then **wanted to hear** is that everything is good (2:6); they will be richer than ever before (2:11). They were certain God would never allow anything bad to happen to them. They were His chosen people. In "God they trust."

Many North Americans love this message too: the important thing is to get rich. Look after ourselves first. God's people will be great again. Other people be damned.

What's Micah's message? *"God has had enough. He says, 'I have some plans of my own: Disaster because of this evil! Your necks are on the line. You're not walking away from this. It's doomsday for you. Mocking ballads will be sung of you, and you yourselves will sing the blues: 'Our lives are ruined, our homes and lands auctioned off. They take everything, leave us nothing! All is sold to the highest bidder.' And there'll be no one to stand up for you, no one to speak for you before God and his jury" (2:3-5).*

God does **NOT** value wealth. God is **NOT** pleased when the rich get richer while the poor get poorer. God does **NOT** reward a "me-first" or "my-nation-first" attitude. God does **NOT** tolerate powerful people taking advantage of weaker people. God does **NOT** approve NOT caring for the poor or foreigners among us. He certainly does **NOT** approve of abusing anyone. It's sin.

As we look at the news today, we struggle to stand outside of the cultural values of our time. We get sucked into the me-first, accumulate-more-and-more, to hell-with-the-rest-of-the-world, make-my-investment-grow, get-rid-of-"those"-people attitudes.

We cannot change the world. But we can make ethical choices in our lives. We can speak about and treat people from other races with dignity and respect. We can support fair trade initiatives. In small ways we can choose to life justly. We can choose to "love our neighbour." How can I do that, today?

*Loving God,
I am just beginning to realize how much you love me.
Your son, Jesus was humble and obedient.
He fulfilled your will for him by becoming human and suffering with us.
I ask you for the desire to become more humble
so that my own life might also bear witness to you.
I want to use the small sufferings I have in this world to give you glory.

Please, Lord, guide my mind with your truth.
Strengthen my life by the example of Jesus.
Help me to be with Jesus in this week.
He died so that I would no longer be separated from you.
Help me to love in such a way that His love shines through me to others.
Amen*

Creighton University

Wednesday, July 30: Micah 3

Micah is riled up. *"But me – I'm filled with God's power, filled with God's Spirit of justice and strength, ready to confront Jacob's crime and Israel's sin" (3:8).* This is a man on a mission.

The leaders of Judah – both politicians and religious leaders – talk about God. But they are far from godly. Rather than defending the poor and powerless, they exploit "common" people. Religious leaders collude

with politicians, speaking messages that endorse the leaders' greed, justify their sins, and make the rich feel good. Rather than fearlessly speaking the Word of God and His justice, they tell their wealthy benefactors what they want to hear. I'm glad no religious leader does that today (I say, facetiously).

The ultimate result of this corruption and greed will be exile. The Temple in Jerusalem, the heart and soul of the Jewish nation and Jewish identity, will be destroyed.

Jessica Nicholas, in a book, ***God Loves Justice: A User-Friendly Guide to Biblical Justice and Righteousness***, says, *"Western views of justice are primarily focused on how things should be done – laws, rules, and what should happen when laws are broken. In Hebrew thought, justice is focused on what life should be like. Justice in the Hebrew world was concerned not just with laws, but with enhancing all human life, especially the social world."*

For us, justice is something static, entrenched in rules of law. In contrast, biblical justice is dynamic, realistic, and practical. Biblical justice is **how we live in God's world** in a way that respects other people and God's creation, treating everyone and everything God created with love, respect, and honour.

Closely related to justice is righteousness. When we live justly, we live righteously. Nicholas goes on to say, *"It might seem that righteousness means you have to live up to God's standards, like when you are in school and have to do everything right in order to get a good grade. But a better way to think of righteousness is living inside God's intended order, living as God intended you to live."*

Living justly and living righteously mean living life as God intended. We live His principles. When we do that, things go well for us and for others. When we don't, bad things happen.

God knows what we need to do to stay healthy, balanced, free, and in peace within the design of His creation. His Word is His how-to-guide for living our healthiest, most fulfilled life. Staying inside His boundary lines is for our own benefit. When we go outside them, we hurt ourselves and others.

Read Micah 2:12-13: *"I'm calling a meeting. I want everyone back. **I'll get them together** in one place – like sheep in a fold, like cattle in a corral – a milling throng of homebound people! Then I, God, will burst all confinements and lead them out into the open. They'll follow their King. **He will be in front** leading them."*

- **God is with you AND He gives you community.** You are part of His flock. You are not alone. God is with you. He will keep you safe. How can that encourage you?
- **God's has a purpose for you.** He is sending you into the world to be His witness, with His presence and power. You have a purpose – to follow Jesus into the open highways and byways of life, being a blessing to others.

Where is Jesus as you go out into the world? He is out front, leading us. How is that good news today?

My Lord,
I was born with so many faults and my nature is so full of weakness,
and yet your son Jesus has died on the cross.
Your son, Jesus, has suffered so much, shed so much blood.
For me.
I know your grace has the power to cleanse me of my many sins
and to make me more like your Son.
Thank you for your goodness and love for me.
I ask you, Father, to watch over me - always.
Amen

Creighton University

Thursday, July 31: Micah 4:1-5

Is there any light at the end of the tunnel? Is there any hope? Reading the news, we're not sure ...

Micah 4:1 literally begins, *"In days to come ..."* These verses may refer to

1. the return of the Jewish people from exile in Babylon (which began in 537 BC) **OR**
2. the coming of Jesus in the first century and the establishment of the church, **OR**
3. the ultimate "Day of the Lord" when Jesus returns in glory and judgment in the future.

Which is correct? We don't know. Probably ALL are, working together to complete God's purpose:

1. in part, this prophecy was fulfilled when the people return to Jerusalem after the exile.
2. in part, Jesus' first coming accomplished some of this, establishing His church.
3. we still await its complete fulfillment with His second coming, in the future.

Micah 3 was about destruction. Micah 4:1-5 are about **reconstruction**. God rebuilds His Temple and city, Jerusalem. He brings peace. He brings reconciliation. He brings justice. Notice this includes **"MANY nations,"** fulfilling God's covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12). God is a missionary God bringing **ALL** peoples together. This is not exclusively about one nation or ethnic group (thankfully).

Think about how Peter's words speak about the fulfillment of this prophecy (1 Peter 2:4-9): *"You are coming to Christ, who is the living cornerstone of God's temple ... And you are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple. What's more, you are his holy priests ..."*

*"You are a chosen people. You are royal priests, a holy nation, God's very own possession. Now **you can show others** the goodness of God, for he called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light."*

We wait for the full realization of this vision when Jesus returns. However, note what is important in the Kingdom of God. It's **loving God. Loving others. Living justly. Seeing His justice done.**

As we pray *"Your Kingdom come and your will be done"* how can we help to see this vision come into being in our own little worlds?

- A vision of peace between ethnic groups (4:3). What might that mean in our community?
- A vision of "sufficiency" – everyone has enough but no one has too much or too little (4:4). What would that look like in our community?
- A vision of safety and security for everyone (4:4). What would this look like on our community?
- How can I be a peacemaker?
- How can I live with a balance of "sufficiency" and generosity?
- How can I help my community be a safe place for all people, for people of all nations?

*Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth:
Set up your kingdom in our midst.
Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God:
Have mercy on us sinners.
Holy Spirit, Breath of the Living God:
Renew us and all the world.
Amen*

N.T. Wright

Friday, August 1: Micah 4:6-13

Advice from my Mom: *"If you can't say anything good about someone, then don't say anything at all."*

Thankfully, Micah has good news for us, too. Micah 4 is great news.

The challenge with the Old Testament prophets is figuring out the time frame. Is this prophecy referring to:

1. The return of the Jewish people from exile in Babylon? **or**
2. Jesus' life, death and resurrection? **or**
3. Jesus' second coming at the end of history?

Some teachers are adamant that somehow **THEY** know it means one or the other.

Scripture doesn't tell us. If the Bible is our authority, we must admit **WE don't know** the time frame of this vision. As we saw yesterday, it may actually refer to all three.

Certainly, some verses seem to be specifically about the exile in Babylon (4:9-11). But is this a description of the reestablishment of Israel, ruled by a perfect, human king. That has not happened – yet.

Micah 4 describes a future greater than the Jewish people returning from exile (4:1-8, 13). The new kingdom described here is not a political/historical unit, the geographic nation we call "Israel." This new kingdom is **ruled directly by God: He is King**. This is about the creation of the "Kingdom of God," a phrase Jesus uses repeatedly in His mission to describe His actions and the church He establishes.

What is the kingdom of God? According to Jesus, it's NOT a geographic kingdom. It's a kingdom of the heart. **His Kingdom is all of us**, from every nation, who allow Him to be King – to rule – in our lives.

The Kingdom of God is a hidden kingdom, transcending time and space. Wherever people love God, love their neighbour, and follow Jesus – there is the Kingdom of God.

His Kingdom comes as we let His love, justice, and righteousness shape our hearts **AND** we as live it out.

This Kingdom, ruled by the King, Jesus, is called "the church" in the New Testament. The Greek word for "church," *"ekklesia,"* literally means "called out people." We are the lame, the remnant, and the exiles called out and gathered together by God to be His people, guided and led by our King (Micah 2:13).

Micah 4:6-7 are a wonderful picture of Jesus' church – gathered together, as a faithful remnant, as a strong nation, under His kingship. Peter has prophecies like this in mind when He writes: *"You are the ones chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work, chosen to be a holy people, God's instruments to do his work and speak out for him, to tell others of the night-and-day difference he made for you – from nothing to something, from rejected to accepted."* (1 Peter 2:9-10).

Spend some time reflecting on 1 Peter 2:9-10 (above) and Micah 4:6-7: *"On that great day, I will round up all the hurt and homeless, everyone I have bruised or banished. I will transform the battered into a company of the elite. I will make a strong nation out of the long lost, a showcase exhibit of God's rule in action, as I rule from Mount Zion, from here to eternity."*

How can these images of who you are as a follower of Jesus – of who we are as the church – encourage and empower you today? What is (y)our mission? How can we live it out today?

*O God, our Father, we thank You that You loved the world so much
 that You gave Your only Son for us and for all mankind.
 We give You thanks this day for Jesus Christ, our blessed Lord,
 that He was obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross.
 That He came to seek and to save that which was lost.
 That He gave His life a ransom for many, a ransom for us.
 That He loved us and gave Himself for us.
 Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.
 Help us this day to remember, and never again to forget,
 the love of Him who laid down His life for us.
 Help us now to love others as you have loved us.
 Amen*

William Barclay

Saturday, August 2: Micah 5:1-9

God's church has survived corruption, persecution, and worse. The good news is that God is with us despite our own sinfulness and despite His enemies. We will survive corruption and hard times, too.

Micah 5:1-5 look beyond the return from exile to the coming of Jesus. As Judah is fighting for its freedom in Micah's day (5:1), God makes the point that ***all the kings born in proud Jerusalem*** will fail. It is the two kings ***born in humble Bethlehem*** who save the people (*Ephrathah* is the district where Bethlehem is).

- The first king born in Bethlehem was David.
- The second king – the perfect ruler to come, Messiah ("the anointed one") – will be Jesus.

Micah 5:2-6 speak of the establishment of the church, those who believe in Him from among the Israelites and others ("his brothers").

Spend some time on 5:4-5a. This is speaking about us, His people, His church. This is speaking about you. *"He will stand and shepherd his flock – you – in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they – you – will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their – your – peace."*

Micah 5:5-8 might be speaking about the Jewish people. Or, in context of the Messianic discussion in 5:1-5, probably refer to the church, us. Believers, filled with the Holy Spirit – God's Kingdom – are scattered in every nation. "Assyria" represents any powers/governments who oppose people who love God.

Even in countries where Christians are bitterly persecuted, His Kingdom is growing. Even in cultures where true Christianity is compromised or corrupted, God is still at work. Praise God.

Statistics from the Baptist World Alliance show the number of Christians just in Baptist churches grew

- +76% in the Caribbean Baptist Fellowship
- +122% in the Asia-Pacific Baptist Fellowship (including China and India)
- +193% in the Union of Baptists in Latin America
- +832% in the All Africa Baptist Fellowship
- +1% in the European Baptist Fellowship
- (North American Baptists shrank -34%, a sad comment on North American church health)

We know that God's kingdom will prevail in justice (Micah 5:9-15). In the meantime, many Christians are brutally abused and killed in many countries. Pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters persecuted in various parts of the world. And pray for the health of North American churches.

Pray that God would give us wisdom to **live as God's people** in this crazy world ...

*Lord Jesus Christ, who said,
"I, if I be lifted up from the earth will draw all men unto me,"
fix our eyes upon Your Cross.
Help us in Your Cross to see the lengths to which man's sin will go.
Help us in the Cross to see that sin is awful to You.
Help us in the Cross to see the horror of sin,
and to depart forever from it.
Help us in the Cross to see the lengths to which Your love will go,
that You loved us so much that You kept nothing back.
Help us in the Cross to see the wonder of love,
and to surrender forever to it.
This we ask for Thy love's sake,
Amen*

William Barclay

Sunday, August 3: Micah 6:1-8

*"What does the LORD require of you?" "What does the LORD require of **ME**?"* That is a big question!

Before we think about the answer, remember God is speaking to His people – already saved – already part of His Kingdom. **This IS NOT about what I must do to be saved.** We are saved by grace, through faith in Jesus. Salvation is NOT something we earn, achieve, or accomplish by our efforts, or goodness. **Salvation is God's good gift.** We simply trust Him, in faith. That's it.

This IS about: "So now that I am saved, how am I going to LIVE my life?"

It's **NOT** about "being religious" – doing all the right religious things. Spiritual activities are fantastic when offered out of thankful hearts, by those who love the Lord. But if a person is just going through "motions" (like offering sacrifices in the Jewish tradition, or going to church in our culture) with no love for God, or passion for His kingdom, they are pointless and hollow.

"What does the LORD require of you?" It's not rocket science: **"He has shown you what is good ..."**

- **act justly**
- **love mercy**
- **walk humbly with your God.**

When Jesus was asked what are the most important commands, how did He answer?

- *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength"* (isn't this roughly the same as *"walk humbly with your God"*?);
- *"Love your neighbour as yourself"* (If we *"act justly"* and *"love mercy"* aren't we doing that?)

God's Word is amazingly consistent. Of course, we should not be surprised.

If you believe in Jesus, you **ARE** saved. Praise God. Thank Him. Worship Him.

Now, spend some time prayerfully reflecting on what it means for you to

- Act justly
- Love mercy
- Walk humbly with your God

*I praise and thank you, O God.
You raised our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead.
I praise and thank you, O Lord Jesus Christ.
You redeemed us by your blood,
You intercede for us to the Father.
You will come again to make all things new.
I praise and thank you, O Holy Spirit.
You spread abroad the love of God.
You fill us and equip us to love others in the name of Jesus.
Blessing and glory, wisdom and thanksgiving,
and honour and power and might,
be to you our God for ever and ever.
Amen*

Thomas Torrance

Heritage Day, Monday, August 4: Micah 6:9-16, Galatians 5:1, 13-15

This week we'll think about what it means to "act justly" from Micah 6:8.

Let's be honest: our society is not perfect. In fact, it's far from perfect.

The well-to-do people of Judah think their world is great. The rich are getting richer. The (equivalent to) stock markets are at all time highs. But they do not "act justly." Non-Jews – foreigners and immigrants – and the poor are treated horribly. They're everything but just/honest. They short-change people ("short ephah," a measure of weight), are dishonest, violent, lie, cheat, abuse ...

What forms of **not** "acting justly" do you see in our community? (Remember God takes injustice seriously)

Reflecting on global economic stresses, Frank Doyle writes:

"Lord, all this financial turmoil seems to touch my prayer in two ways.

- *Sometimes I feel moral indignation at the greed of the fat cats whose desire for ever-greater profits has exploited the weak. I hope that they may move from blindness to a sense of the real world of people, and realise the futility of their greed that wants more and more money. 'What does it profit to gain the whole world and suffer the loss of your soul?' (Mark 8:36). But I know that such indignation is not always from the good spirit; it may be mixed with an envy in which there is little charity; I may just be jealous I did not make a bundle. I need to watch it.*
- *At other times I feel fear and insecurity for myself and my loved ones. This pushes me to look at myself. Does insecurity make me more self-seeking and less caring about the needs of others,*

lessening my humanity, clouding my sense that people matter more than money? Or does this worldwide turmoil strengthen my compassion? Poverty is not good in itself, but where it leads to a deeper dependence on God and coexists with generosity it can be a rare grace – remember Jesus marveling at the widow's mite (Mark 12:41-43).

'Trop est avare à qui Dieu ne suffit.' 'You're too greedy if God is not enough for you.'"

Remember: we are saved by Jesus. Spend some time reflecting on your salvation through Jesus. What a wonderful gift. Celebrate His love. Give God thanks for your salvation!

Therefore: we are called to live wisely, *"by the Spirit."* Read Galatians 5:1, 13-15 in *The Message* translation: *"Christ has set us free to live a free life. So take your stand! Never again let anyone put a harness of slavery on you. ... It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don't use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that's how freedom grows."*

"For everything we know about God's Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. That's an act of true freedom. If you bite and ravage each other, watch out—in no time at all you will be annihilating each other, and where will your precious freedom be then?"

How do these verses in Galatians help you think through and apply the prophets to your life?

How can you "live justly" today?

*O Lord Jesus Christ, who conquered death and rose from the dead,
and who is alive for evermore,
help us never to forget your Risen Presence for ever with us.
Help us to remember,
that you are with us in every time of perplexity to guide and to direct;
that you are with us in every time of sorrow to comfort and to console;
that you are with us in every time of temptation to strengthen and to inspire;
that you are with us in every time of loneliness to cheer and to befriend;
that you are with us even in death
to bring us through the waters to the glory on the other side.
Make us to be certain that there is nothing in time or in eternity
which can separate us from you.
Amen*

William Barclay

Tuesday, August 5: Micah 7:1-7, Galatians 5:16-26

The injustice continues. What a horrible place Israel has become. Our hope is in 7:7: *"But as for me, I watch in hope for the LORD, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me."*

If you are feeling like the world is against you, reflect on this verse. If you read the news and feel like it's literally going to hell, meditate on this verse. Pray. Wait for God. He hears you.

Paul continues to remind us we are to "act justly" in this crazy world. God hears us. And He calls us **to ACT justly**. He writes: *"So I say, let the Holy Spirit guide your lives. Then you won't be doing what your sinful nature craves. The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants."*

And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions. But when you are directed by the Spirit, you are not under obligation to the law of Moses.

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

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

"Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. Since we are living by the Spirit, let us follow the Spirit's leading in every part of our lives (or let us walk in step with the Spirit). Let us not become conceited, or provoke one another, or be jealous of one another" (Galatians 5:16-26).

Spend some time reflecting on the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Are you becoming more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled? Or less so?

Choose one or two of these fruit you need to work on ... what can you do today to put that into practice?

*May the God who created a world of wonder, diversity and beauty
Send us out in the spirit of freedom
to bring creativity and life to our communities and to our world.
May the Christ-child who overturned tables and lifted up the lowly
Send us out in the spirit of justice
to be the voice for the voiceless to our communities and to our world.
And may the Spirit who stirs hope and brings healing
Send us out in the spirit of peace to bring reconciliation
to our communities and to our world.
Amen*

Clare McBeath & Tim Presswood

Wednesday, August 6: Micah 7:8-20

Have you ever made a choice – a poor choice – and instantly regretted it? But the deed is done and you must live with the consequences ...

As you read through the Bible, it's amazing how many people make bad choices. Then they must deal with the consequences.

- In Genesis 13, Lot makes a selfish choice, greedily choosing great-looking land. He is also choosing to live among evil people. He pays a high price, losing his land and his wife.
- David looks out from a rooftop, sees Bathsheba bathing, and make a choice that will lead to rape, murder, heartbreak, and grief.

We struggle with the lure of "me-first," "success," and "pleasure" even though they lead us into problems.

Micah's world is full of me-first, injustice, and evil. But Micah sees hope. *"Where is the god who can compare with you – wiping the slate clean of guilt, turning a blind eye, a deaf ear, to the past sins of your purged and precious people? You don't nurse your anger and don't stay angry long, for mercy is your specialty. That's what you love most. And compassion is on its way to us. You'll stamp out our wrongdoing. You'll sink our sins to the bottom of the ocean."*

Jesus lives out God's love, mercy, and compassion by taking on Himself all our sins so we are completely forgiven. Isn't that great news?

Spend some time confessing your sins to God. Confess them, not to wallow in them. Confess your sins so you can be free of them. They can be, once and for all, stamped out and hurled into the depths of the sea. If you are a visual person, imagine each of your sins being ground into the dust or thrown into the ocean. They are gone. Finished. Dealt with. Forever.

John writes these honest words: *"God is light, pure light; there's not a trace of darkness in him. If we claim that we experience a shared life with God and continue to stumble around in the dark, we're obviously lying through our teeth - we're not living what we claim. But if we walk in the light, God himself being the light, we also experience a shared life with one another, as the sacrificed blood of Jesus, God's Son, purges all our sin. If we claim that we're free of sin, we're only fooling ourselves. A claim like that is nonsense."*

"On the other hand, if we admit our sins—simply come clean about them—he won't let us down; he'll be true to himself. He'll forgive our sins and purge us of all wrongdoing" (1 John 1:5-9). That is great news.

Confess to God whatever you need to ...

*Lord of all life and power,
who through the mighty resurrection of your Son
overcame the old order of sin and death
to make all things new in him:
Grant that we,
being dead to sin and alive to you in Jesus Christ,
may reign with him in glory;
to whom with you and the Holy Spirit
be praise and honor, glory and might,
now and in all eternity.
Amen.*

Creighton University

Thursday, August 7: Nahum 1:2-8

Written by Troy Taylor

How can a good, loving God destroy people like he promises to do in Nahum? How can that be fair, just, or good? We often ask this question as we read the Old Testament.

200 years before the prophet Nahum wrote his message of destruction, God sent another prophet to Nineveh: Jonah.

Jonah's question was exactly the opposite of our modern one: How can God forgive my enemies? For Jonah, the question was: Do I want to do what God asks me to do, knowing he would rather forgive my enemies rather than smiting them? (Read the story of Jonah's anger in Jonah 4)

Both sides of the question are in Nahum 1:7-8. *"The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him, but with an overwhelming flood he will make an end of Nineveh; he will pursue his foes into the realm of darkness."*

Today, we focus on God's desire to forgive.

Author Philip Yancey writes, in *What's So Amazing About Grace*, *"Forgiveness is not the same as pardon ... you may forgive one who wronged you and still insist on a just punishment for that wrong. If you can bring yourself to the point of forgiveness, though, you will release its healing power both in you and in the person who wronged you."*

Isn't that remarkable? The very power of forgiveness that God extends to my enemy begins in me. The channel of God's grace runs directly through my heart.

Yancey continues, *"Forgiveness breaks the cycle of blame and loosens the stranglehold of guilt. It accomplishes these two feats through a third: In a remarkable linkage, forgiveness places the forgiver on the same side as the party that did the wrong. Through it we realize we are not as different from the wrongdoer as we would like to think."*

In Matthew 6:14-15, Jesus says, *"For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."*

The stakes are high. With good reason.

If we are forgiven by God, yet hold on to bitterness or hurt or anger, then sin maintains its stranglehold on our freedom to know God's life. Even with God's grace, the focus of our gaze remains on the sin against us, and we spiral into death.

God would rather forgive us, and our enemies, so that his creation can begin healing from the effects of evil and sin. It begins in me, and flows through me.

Consider today, if your heart is hard towards a person, a group, or a memory. Begin the long, hard process of forgiving, and trust that God will do a miracle for you. I pray that you will find the freedom of peace in the process of forgiveness.

*O Lord Jesus Christ,
forgive us for the times when we have forgotten your Risen Presence forever with us.
Forgive us for times when we failed in some task,
because we did not ask for Your help.
Forgive us for times when we fell to some temptation,
because we tried to meet it by ourselves.
Forgive us for times when we were afraid,
because we thought we were alone in the dark.
Forgive us for times when we were driven to despair,
because we were trying to fight the battle in our own strength.
Forgive us for times when we said and did things
which now we are ashamed to remember that you heard and saw.
Help us find courage and strength to meet all things undismayed.
This we ask for Thy love's sake.
Amen*

William Barclay

Friday, August 8: Nahum 1:3-8, Part 2

Written by Troy Taylor

Yesterday, we considered why God forgives my enemies. We also left a question hanging: How can a good, and loving God destroy a people like he promises to do in Nahum?

Today, we look at the second part: God's overwhelming flood that destroys his foes.

This short line in Nahum recalls the chaotic, churning, uncontrollable deluge that swamped Pharaoh's army during the exodus, as well as covered the earth in Genesis. It is brutal, prolonged, and complete.

Why does God do this?

If I was a soldier in Pharaoh's army, I can imagine the terror of seeing the approaching tidal wave, feel the dry ground under my feet shudder as tonnes of water crash down. I can hear nothing but the wave.

But when I think about another perspective, all I can feel is relief. If I was an escaped, Hebrew slave, I can imagine the terror of seeing the world-class army of my slave-master coming down the same, miraculous path of my flight. And then, by the unseen hand of God, the waves crush Pharaoh's ability to hunt me down, recapture me, and enslave me and my children, again.

- I can stop looking over my shoulder.
- I am free.

The awfulness of destruction is necessary for the oppressed to experience true freedom.

In many situations, people refuse to stop their hurtful, selfish ways. The Assyrians, to whom God had sent Jonah two hundred-ish years earlier, refused to heed God's warning, and brutalized the known world. Thus Nahum's prophecy of destruction.

The beauty of Nahum's prophecy for us is this: God takes the burden of destruction in his hands – we do not need to find the strength to free ourselves, neither do we need to get blood on our own hands. God takes that burden for us.

Psalms 23 says,

*"The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."*

In these familiar words we learn these truths. Sometimes the right path leads through the valley of darkness. But we do not go alone. God is with us.

Even when God leads us down another right path, to the presence of our enemies, we do not go to fight. That part is already dealt with by God. We sit, and rest, and feast at God's banquet table after he has done the fighting.

Consider today where you anticipate a fight.

- Where do you feel stuck, enslaved, or pressed down?
- Are you considering "helping" God's promises to come true in your timing, or in your own way?

I pray that you have the courage, and the strength, to wait and see God's goodness to you.

*O God, our Father, who makes the light to shine out of the darkness,
we thank You for waking us to see the light of this new day.
Help us to waste none of its hours;
to soil none of its moments;
to neglect none of its opportunities;
to fail in none of its duties.
And bring us to the evening time undefeated by any temptation,
at peace with ourselves,
at peace with our fellow human beings,
and at peace with You.
This we ask for Your love's sake.
Amen*

William Barclay

Saturday, August 9: Psalm 100

We have read some hard words in Micah and Nahum over the past couple of weeks. We have seen evil and injustice in their world. We have reflected on the evil and injustice in our own.

For perspective, let's simply worship God with this wonderful psalm of praise ...

Jessica Nicholas writes, *"Delight is God's why behind the justice, righteousness, and steadfast love He practices. It's not out of frustration or obligation, but delight."*

- God's good will is that we know His ways, follow them, and live full, content, meaningful lives.
- God's justice leads us to live full, meaningful lives in community.
- God's justice leads us to joy, hope, peace, and love in the kind of society for which He created us.

What are the reasons for giving thanks the psalmist talks about? What are you thankful for?

List some things that you are thankful to God for. Thank **Him** in your prayer today.

What are some things you are thankful to significant people for (parents, kids, spouse, friends)? Tell **them** about it today. Say "thank you" to someone who has made a difference in your life, today.

It is a great discipline to simply take time to be thankful ...

*Lord God, as once your Holy presence filled the temple,
we thank you that your Holy Spirit now fills your people the Church.
Fill each of us with your Spirit.
May our lives be daily transformed.
Ignite in us a passion to seek your will,
a desire to know your word,
and a readiness to respond.
So fill us with your Spirit that our lives breathe out your praise.
Make your Church a temple of the Holy Spirit.
Where there is injustice, make your church a royal priesthood and a holy nation.
Where there is violence, make your church an ambassador for Christ.
Where there is greed, hatred, or pride,
grant your church a truly prophetic voice.
Fill your people with your Holy Spirit,
that we might be a holy presence in your world.
Amen*

Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church, London

Sunday, August 10: Habakkuk 1:1-11

I want to ask God some hard questions. Why do good people have such a hard time? Why do nasty people thrive? Why is there so much cruelty and injustice in the world? Why do some good people have chronic pain? These are honest questions. Tough questions. Not easy to answer questions.

Habakkuk is looking at the situation in Judah (in particular, Jerusalem). It's not good: *"Must I forever see these evil deeds? Why must I watch all this misery? Wherever I look, I see destruction and violence. I am surrounded by people who love to argue and fight. The law has become paralyzed, and there is no justice in the courts. The wicked far outnumber the righteous, so that justice has become perverted"* (1:3-4).

It sounds like Habakkuk has been reading/watching/listening to my news feed in 2025. Habakkuk asks God hard questions: How can this be? Why is there no justice? What happens next?

God honours Habakkuk with an answer, but not a comforting one. In the case of Judah and Jerusalem in the 6th century BC, God will deal with the evil by allowing the Babylonian army to invade. They will take the people into captivity. The nationalistic idea that, because Judah/Israel are God's people He will protect them no matter what, is thoroughly debunked. God takes evil – even among His own people – seriously.

Thankfully, God does not deal with us the way He dealt with His people back then. As people of the new covenant, we are saved by His grace, mercy, and forgiveness. We don't "earn" our salvation the way people in Old Testament days did by trying to keep all the Law. We are saved by God's loving grace not by works. Phew.

Paul, reflecting on some Christians who wanted everyone to follow all the old Jewish laws, bluntly says, *"Who has cast an evil spell on you? For the meaning of Jesus Christ's death was made as clear to you as if you had seen a picture of his death on the cross. Let me ask you this one question: Did you receive the Holy Spirit by obeying the law of Moses? Of course not! You received the Spirit because you believed the message you heard about Christ. How foolish can you be? After starting your new lives in the Spirit, why are you now trying to become perfect by your own human effort? ..."*

"Does God give you the Holy Spirit and work miracles among you because you obey the law? Of course not! It is because you believe the message you heard about Christ. In the same way, "Abraham believed God, and God counted him as righteous because of his faith" (Genesis 15:6). The real children of Abraham, then, are those who put their faith in God.

"What's more, the Scriptures looked forward to this time when God would declare the Gentiles (non-Jews/us) to be righteous because of their faith. God proclaimed this good news to Abraham long ago when he said, "All nations will be blessed through you" (Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 22:18). So all who put their faith in Christ share the same blessing Abraham received because of his faith" (Galatians 3:1-9).

We are God's beloved, chosen, saved people. How do we live that out, in practice?

*Eternal and ever blessed God,
You send Your Spirit to be our teacher and our guide.
Help us follow where your Spirit leads.
Help us open our minds to Your Spirit's teaching.
Help us to act without fear as Your Spirit prompts.
Help us do what is right, true, honourable, and good, through Your Spirit.
May Your Spirit inspire us all to live in truth and to live in love.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen*

William Barclay

Monday, August 11: Habakkuk 1:12-2:11

Habbakkuk wants to know what God will do about the evil in Jerusalem. He gets an answer – God will allow the Jewish people to be conquered and exiled. Habbukkuk is not happy. How can God, who is holy and pure (2:13) use a horrible tool like the Babylonian army to correct His people? That seems very wrong.

So he asks another question: How can this be?

God's response is twofold:

- Don't despair: the truly faithful, godly people (there are many) will be saved (2:4);
- Eventually Babylon, too, will get its just desserts. They will be judged and destroyed (2:6-19).

The key verse in this section is 2:4: *"Look at the proud! They trust in themselves, and their lives are crooked. But the righteous will live by their faithfulness to God."* How does this speak to us in 2025?

The second half of this verse is quoted three times in the New Testament:

In Galatians 3, Paul writes: *"No one can be made right with God by trying to keep the law. For the Scriptures say, 'It is through faith that a righteous person has life' (Habakkuk 2:4). This way of faith is very different from the way of law, which says, 'It is through obeying the law that a person has life' (Leviticus 18:5). 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, God has blessed the Gentiles with the same blessing he promised to Abraham, so we who are believers might receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith" (Galatians 3:11-14).*

In Romans, Paul says: *"I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes ... This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, 'It is through faith that a righteous person has life' (Habakkuk 2:4)"* (Romans 1:16-17).

Hebrews 10:35-39 reads: *"Do not throw away your confident trust in the Lord ... Patient endurance is what you need now, so that you continue to do God's will. Then you will receive all that he has promised. 'For in just a little while, the Coming One will come and not delay. And my righteous ones will live by faith. But I will take no pleasure in anyone who turns away' (Habakkuk 2:3-4). We are not like those who turn away from God to their own destruction. We are the faithful ones, whose souls will be saved."*

This side of Jesus' death and resurrection, Scripture makes it clear we are saved by faith in God's grace. Faith – and faith alone – is what is critical. Not keeping all the rules.

No matter what comes our way – good or bad – our lives are safe in God's hands as we put our faith in Him.

That is great news. How then can we live in this renewed confidence? How can we live by faith?

*Out of this muddle, I cry to you,
God who has ordered the universe,
in whose hand the cosmos is secure.
Guide me to make a right beginning,
to do those things that are most needful,
and to know when to stop and rest.
Grant me humor and a light spirit in the face of what seems overwhelming.
Make my hands steady at their work,
my heart steady at its prayer,
and let me, in all things, navigate by love,
for Your love's sake.
Amen*

Tuesday, August 12: Habakkuk 3

When everything seems bleak, it's hard to know how to respond. We can feel like the Assyrians are battering down the doors of our lives. There doesn't seem to be much hope. What do we do?

God doesn't promise us a life that's all sweetness and light. The Bible is honest: we may have very hard times. **But, God is with us** in those tough circumstances. That makes all the difference.

James, the brother of Jesus, writes, *"Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing"* (James 1:2-4).

Does James have credibility? He saw all that happened to Jesus. He, himself, was martyred, either in AD 62 by being stoned to death on the order of High Priest Ananus ben Ananus, or in AD 69 by being thrown off the pinnacle of the Temple by scribes and Pharisees, then clubbed to death.

Paul – who himself will be martyred for his faith – writes these words: *"With God on our side, how can we*

lose? If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing himself to the worst by sending his own Son, is there anything else he wouldn't gladly and freely do for us?

"And who would dare tangle with God by messing with one of God's chosen? Who would dare even to point a finger? The One who died for us – who was raised to life for us – is in the presence of God at this very moment sticking up for us.

"Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture ...

"None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I'm absolutely convinced that nothing – nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable – absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us." (Romans 8:31-39).

God will be with us in the toughest of times. He will get us through.

*"Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vines;
even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren;
even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation!
The Sovereign Lord is my strength!
He makes me as surefooted as a deer, able to tread upon the heights." (3:17-19)*

*O God, I ask not for easier tasks.
I ask for stronger aptitudes and greater talents
to meet any tasks which may come my way.
Help me to help others so that their lives may be made easier and happier.
Strengthen my confidence in my fellow men despite what they may do or say.
Give me strength to live according to the Golden Rule
(to love others as you would have them love you),
enthusiasm to inspire those around me,
sympathy to help lighten the burdens of those who suffer,
and a spirit of joy and gladness to share with others.
Amen*

Wednesday, August 13: Psalm 28

What does the Lord require of me? Remember Micah 6:8?

- To act justly. We thought about that last week.
- **To love mercy. We will think about this, this week.**
- To walk humbly with my God. Next week.

Our great model for "acting justly" is God Himself – He always does what is right, true, and just. God is also our perfect model of "mercy."

God is just. He is also merciful. He doesn't punish me according to what I deserve. Though I've sinned, He doesn't condemn me. Instead, He offers me forgiveness. He offers me grace. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, He offers me mercy – a new beginning – forgiven, restored, renewed, filled with His Spirit.

Psalm 28 is a celebration of God's mercy.

How do I experience God's mercy?

- I confess my sins and know His forgiveness.
- I repent and choose to live justly and righteously.
- I come with my troubles and trials; He will get me through.

What does mercy look like in my life ...

- Mercy for others in difficult circumstances (like David in Psalm 28)? How can I help them?
- For those who have sinned against me? (*"Forgive me my trespasses **as I forgive** those who ..."*?)

Mother Teresa says, *"It is not enough for us to say: 'I love God.' I also have to love my neighbour. In the Scriptures, John says that you are a liar if you say you love God and you do not love your neighbour. How can you love God whom you do not see, if you do not love your neighbour whom you see, whom you touch, with whom you live? And he uses a very big word: 'You are a liar.' It is one of those words that is frightening to read and yet it is really true."*

How can I act justly **AND** live out God's mercy?

*Grant me, O Lord, to know what I ought to know,
to love what I ought to love,
to value what is precious in your sight,
and to hate what is offensive to You.
May I never judge things based on my feelings or emotions.
May Your Spirit help me clearly see what is right and good in Your eyes.
May I love others as You show love to me.
May I show mercy to others as You show mercy to me.
Amen.*

Thomas À Kempis (1380-1471)

Thursday, August 14: Luke 5:12-16

Peter Greaves, a leprosy patient (yes, leprosy still exists), comments on his experience: *"I was recognizably human; I had at least the usual complement of legs and arms; but I might have been some shameful piece of garbage. There was something indecent about the way in which I was being furtively shuffled out of life."*

In the first century, Lepers were 'untouchables' (and still are in parts of the world where the disease is prevalent). Lepers were cut off from "normal" society, family, and friends. They were exiled to colonies outside town.

None of us can appreciate what it's like to be allowed absolutely no human contact.

What does Jesus do? He **reaches out** and **touches** this man. For this leper, having someone touch him is an incredible gift of selfless love. It's a wonderful picture of mercy.

Dr. Bob Cochrane, a Scottish missionary in India over 80 years ago, pioneered treatment with lepers. He said, *"I'm not interested in Christianity. I'm interested in Christ, which is an entirely different matter."*

Paul Brand & Philip Yancey, comment on Cochrane's example: *"Citing the example of Jesus, who had broken cultural taboos by reaching out to victims of leprosy, Cochrane led a campaign against the prevailing social stigma. He sent shock waves through the medical community by hiring leprosy patients to work in his home, one as his personal cook and the other as his gardener."*

Dr. Bob Cochrane modelled Jesus' mercy. It's an amazing model of Jesus' love to treat lepers like human beings who can live meaningful lives. It's a beautiful act of mercy to treat "untouchables" as equals.

Who are the "lepers" – the "untouchables" – in our culture? The poor? Immigrants? People with disabilities? Other ethnic or religious groups? How can I show mercy?

"Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can" (John Wesley).

*Give us, O Lord, steadfast hearts,
which no unworthy thought can drag downwards.
Give us unconquered hearts,
which no tribulation can wear out.
Give us upright hearts,
which no unworthy purpose may tempt aside.
Give us, O Lord our God, understanding to know You.
Give us diligence to seek You.
Give us wisdom to find You.
Give us faithfulness that may finally embrace You.
Amen.*

Friday, August 15: Luke 5:17-26

Mercy is practical. Jesus touches a leper. Dr. Bob Cochrane welcomes lepers into his home.

Today, a paralyzed fellow's friends bring him to Jesus. Jesus heals him.

We may not have the gift of healing. But any practical help for those in need is a tremendous blessing. It may simply mean bringing a friend to meet Jesus.

"Love," as Jesus embodies and teaches it, is not a warm, fuzzy feeling. God's love is love in action. God's love has hands and feet attached to it. For Jesus, it led Him to the cross. So, if I "love mercy," I don't just "feel" warm, fuzzy, and compassionate. My mercy leads to action. I do something merciful.

Mercy also sees the spiritual root of the problem. Yes, this man needs to walk. Jesus provides that very practical help. But He also sees into the man's soul and knows he needs God's forgiveness and love. Being able to walk, but not having a soul healed by God, is not enough. He needs to know God.

Through Jesus' love, I need to help people practically.

Mercy and love mean I can also help people meet Jesus. Only Jesus can bring spiritual healing.

- Historically, some Christians have emphasized social concern and justice – if we just feed, clothe, educate, provide health care for people, we have done all we need to do.

- Other Christians have emphasized spirituality – people only need to know Jesus as Saviour; we should not get involved in practical things like medical care, housing, agriculture, justice, etc.

This story shows us Jesus helping with both practical compassion **AND** experiencing God's love and forgiveness. They're not either/or. **They are both/and.** Both are essential in God's mercy.

Our mission organization, Canadian Baptist Ministries (www.cbmin.org) emphasizes both of these. They speak in terms of sharing God's love **in Word and in Deed**. It's not either/or. It's both/and. As our church seeks to be Good News in our community, we want to share our faith with our friends, neighbours, and families **AND** provide practical help through visiting, caring, the Soup Kitchen, Food Banks, Days for Girls, providing community, etc.

Mother Teresa says, "*Charity (we might say "mercy") begins today. Today somebody is suffering. Today somebody is in the street. Today somebody is hungry. Our work is for today; yesterday has gone; tomorrow has not yet come. We have only today to make Jesus known, loved, served, fed, clothed, sheltered. Do not wait for tomorrow. Tomorrow we will not have them if we do not feed them today.*"

Who can you help, practically, today? Who can you share your faith in Jesus with today?

*O Holy Spirit of God, be with us.
Inspire all our thoughts.
Fill our imaginations.
Guide all our decisions.
Order all our doings.
Be with us in our silence and in our speech.
Be with us in our haste and in our leisure.
Be with us in company and in solitude.
Be with us in the freshness of the morning and in the weariness of the evening.
Give us grace, humbly, to rejoice in Your companionship.
Give us grace, humbly, to live with grace with all we meet.
Amen*

Saturday, August 16: Read Luke 10:25-37

- How is this a story of God's mercy?
- Mercy for one another?
- How can this story teach you today?

Notice the context of this story. "*One day an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus by asking him this question: 'Teacher, what should I do to inherit eternal life?'*"

Jesus replies citing two key Old Testament principles, "'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your mind.' **And**, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

In Matthew and Mark, Jesus emphasizes the same two commands, but in a slightly different context: "*One of them, an expert in religious law, tried to trap him with this question: 'Teacher, which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses?'*" (Matthew 22:35-36).

Loving God **and** loving our neighbour are the most important commandments in the Law. They are keys to

eternal life. No excuses. This is crucial stuff.

In Luke 10, the lawyer wants to wiggle out of his responsibility, so he asks Jesus to specify who his neighbour is. He is expecting to hear his neighbour is **only** his Jewish, adult, male, close relative/friend. Certainly not a non-Jew, or non-male non-person (which is how Jewish men saw anyone non-Jewish, non-adult, and non-male). In particular, *"Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans"* (John 4:9).

Notice the victim in this story is an adult Jewish male. The hero is a **non-person**, a Samaritan. Jesus is deliberately challenging the lawyer's racism, prejudice, and pre-conceptions about many things, including that "other" person.

A neighbour is simply someone who shows a fellow human being mercy (Luke 10:37). Who is your neighbour? Everyone. No exceptions. No excuses.

Jesus ends by telling the lawyer, *"Go and do the same."* Act justly. Show mercy. Just do it.

What is Jesus saying to me?

*God, help us
To be generous in our opinions of others.
To be considerate of all we meet.
To be patient with those with whom we work.
To be faithful to every trust.
To be courageous in the face of danger.
To be humble in all our living.
To be prayerful every hour of the day.
To be joyous in all life's experience.
And to be dependent upon You
for strength in facing life's uncertainties.
Amen*

Sunday, August 17: Zephaniah 1:1-2:3

In May and June, we talked about spiritual pathways, different ways people relate to God: intellectual, serving, activism, creation, relational, contemplative, worship. Which do you think describes Zephaniah?

He's a passionate activist. He sees evil and corruption in Jerusalem and Judah and wants change. Now!

What are the issues? The Jewish people have left God. They are worshipping other gods – the Philistine deity, Baal, **AND** more subtle and seductive gods like money, power, nation, and sex. Rich people are getting super-rich. Poor people are getting poorer. Businessmen, politicians, and religious leaders are feeling good. But Zephaniah cries out *"Your silver and gold will not save you!"* (1:18).

It sounds bleak.

Yet there is hope.

What does Zephaniah counsel? *"Seek the Lord, all who are humble, and follow his commands. Seek to do what is right and to live humbly"* (2:3).

Following God is not neurosurgery or rocket science. The prophets consistently have the same advice:

- **Seek God.** Pray. Read Scripture. Spend time with Him. God doesn't play hide-and-seek with us. If we want to know Him, we will find Him. Remember Hosea 4:2-3 – *"Oh, that we might know the Lord! Let us press on to know him. He will respond to us as surely as the arrival of dawn or the coming of rains in early spring."* Jesus says, *"Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest"* (John 11:28).
- **Be humble.** God is God (you aren't). He is our Creator, all-knowing and all-wise. Take His wisdom and direction seriously. His way works.
- **Do what He says.** As our Creator, He really does know how best to live a fulfilling life. Put it into practice.
- **Do what is right.** As Micah put: *"This is what the Lord requires of you: to **do what is right**, to **love mercy**, and to **walk humbly with your God**"* (Micah 6:8).

May God help us to live like this ...

*Lord, I shout with joy to you.
Help me to worship you with gladness.
Help me to come before you singing with joy.
Lord, I affirm that you are the Lord, my God.
You made me, and I am yours.
I am your child, a sheep of your pasture.
I will enter your gates with thanksgiving.
I will go into your courts with praise.
I will thank you and praise your name.
For you are good.
Your unfailing love continues forever,
and your faithfulness continues to each generation.
Amen*

Monday, August 18: Zephaniah 3

Beirut is a crazy city. When I was there in 2010, it was still rebuilding from the brutal Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) and occupation by the Syrian army (until 2005). It's rebuilding again from Israeli attacks.

Population estimates range from slightly more than 1 million to slightly less than 2 million – no one knows for sure, especially with floods of refugees from Syria and Iraq. When I was in Beirut, 15 years ago, I only saw two working traffic lights. A few major intersections had police directing traffic. Most intersections were just a chaotic free-for-all with vehicles edging across the road or around dysfunctional roundabouts.

Many neighbourhoods were still filled with bullet-ridden, blown up apartment blocks. We visited a Palestinian refugee camp – an overcrowded, horribly constructed ghetto – where 10s of thousands of people have been born, lived, and died since 1948 (initially mostly Orthodox **Christians**).

Parts of Beirut are gorgeous and safe. Parts of Beirut are definitely not nice or safe.

That, Zephaniah is saying, is what Jerusalem has become back in his day. There is violence. No law and order. Corrupt judges. Greedy priests. Crooked leaders. Nowhere in Jerusalem was safe. Yet God says, *"But the Lord is still there in the city, and he does no wrong. Day by day he hands down justice, and he*

does not fail" (3:5).

Where is the Lord in a broken city like Zephaniah's Jerusalem? Or Beirut? Where is His justice and mercy?

God is very much still there in the city, His people. Rupen Das, Canadian Baptist Ministries field staff in Lebanon writes this: *"The Syrian conflict has now become a slow meat grinder with hundreds being killed every month, while families and communities across Syria are being systematically destroyed. There are no good guys in this conflict and there are no visible and viable solutions being considered."*

"In the 'fog of war' it is very easy to miss the small signs of hope in the midst of the evil. One of these signs is the role that many local Arab churches have assumed during the Syrian crisis. As the present Syrian crisis developed and spilled into Lebanon over the past three years, the Lebanese Baptist community, officially the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development (LSESD), decided to respond to the unfolding humanitarian crisis. Being a church based agency, it worked to empower local churches inside Syria and in Lebanon to reach beyond their comfort zones and social boundaries to help those in need. This is a story of reconciliation that has not yet been told."

"Syria had occupied Lebanon for 20 years and every Lebanese family has stories of their homes being destroyed, family members killed, imprisoned and tortured, and the country systematically destroyed. The decision by a handful of Lebanese pastors to reach out to Syrian refugees in Lebanon meant being able to forgive the Syrians and then lead their congregations to forgive. This went against the grain of Lebanese society and to date most of these pastors face opposition for their actions from family, neighbours and others in the community. In one church, 85% of the congregation left the church because the pastor decided to help the refugees. Inside Syria, where the Protestant Churches over the centuries had become very insular, many among them decided to make their churches places of compassion for people of any faith to find help ..."

"In the Syrian crisis, the local church as an institution in the community has enabled access to areas and to refugees and those affected by violence that would not have been possible otherwise. While many organizations are providing assistance, the local church can be a place of refuge and compassion."

The good news is God does not abandon His people – even in Syria, even in Lebanon. He certainly has not abandoned us.

Zephaniah reminds us to trust in God – not in our wealth, our government, our health, our possessions, or our own strength. If we walk humbly with God, He will provide for us: *"I'll get rid of your arrogant leaders. No more pious strutting on my holy hill! I'll leave a core of people among you who are poor in spirit. They'll make their home in God. This core holy people will not do wrong. They won't lie, won't use words to flatter or seduce. Content with who they are and where they are, unanxious, they'll live at peace"* (3:11-12).

*O, You who are the Way, the Truth, and the Life,
I lift my heart to You.
Guide me in the Way this day,
enlighten me with the Truth,
and grant me the more abundant Life which You alone can give.
This I ask, not that I may selfishly get good or glory for myself,
but that I may do good to others and so glorify Your name.
Amen.*

Tuesday, August 19: Genesis 17

Thinking back to Micah 6:8, what does the Lord require of me?

- To act justly: we thought about this two weeks ago.
- To love mercy: we thought about this last week.
- **To walk humbly with my God: this week.**

Our great model for “**acting justly**” is God Himself: He will always do what is right and true.

God is also our perfect model of “**mercy**.” In His justice, God is also merciful: He does not punish me according to what I deserve, instead He offers me grace and mercy through Jesus’ death and resurrection. We’re to show mercy to one another.

We are also called to **walk humbly with God**. Throughout the Bible, God reminds His people that He “walked” with them out of Egypt and through the wilderness. He continues to walk with them. He has always been with them. He is still always with them. He will always be with them.

What does it mean for us to “*walk with God*”? Do we appreciate He is always with us? Do we talk with Him? Seek His wisdom? Live in such a way that He is honoured in all we do and say?

In the days of Zephaniah and the other prophets, most people do not “*walk with God*.” Their daily lives show no evidence of being touched, shaped, informed, or renewed by the Spirit of God.

Abram does sincerely **try** to walk with God. He leaves his old home in Haran and, in faith, walks with God. For over two decades he believes God will give him and Sarai a child. 24 years after God’s promise (in Genesis 12:1-3), Abraham is still faithful. He fails often. But he genuinely tries to walk with God.

What does it mean for you to walk with God? Are you aware that He is walking with you, every moment of every day? Do you think of your life that way?

- If so, how does He shape how you live?
- If not, how might you live differently if you consciously tried “walking with God”?

Imagine God walking with you everywhere (He does, by His Spirit). How will you spend your time, relate to others, make choices, spend money? Ask God for wisdom, strength, comfort, guidance, and resolve.

*O God, I thank You for this universe, my great home.
Thank you for its vastness and its riches,
and for the vast array of life which teems upon it, of which I am part.
I praise You for the arching sky and the blessed winds,
for the driving clouds and the constellations on high.
I praise You for the salt sea and the running water,
for the hills, for the trees, and for the grass under my feet.
I thank You for my senses by which I can see the splendor of the morning,
and hear the jubilant songs of love,
and smell the breath of the summer.
Grant me, I pray, a heart wide open to all this joy and beauty,
and save my soul from being so steeped in care or so darkened by passion
that I pass heedless and unseeing
when even the thorn-bush by the wayside is aflame with the glory of God.
Amen.*

Wednesday, August 20: Proverbs 3:1-18

God wants us to "walk with" Him on the paths of life: *"In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight"* (Proverbs 3:6). But we can "walk with" someone in different ways.

For instance, I can go for a walk around Henderson Lake with Marianne in different ways:

- I could walk ahead of her, behind her, even beside her, but never talk with her, listen to her, or interact with her. If my real priority is the **"walk"** itself – accomplishing the goal of getting around the lake – who I'm with (even if I'm with anyone at all) may be incidental.
- **Or** we could walk AND we could listen and talk. We could share our thoughts and minds. We could share our experiences and plans, our worries and concerns, our hopes and dreams. The real issue would be the **"with"** – the fact that it is Marianne that I'm with, that we are spending time together, talking about life with one another. The destination would be incidental (Henderson Lake? The back lane? It wouldn't really matter). The **journey "with"** is the important part.

How do you walk with God?

- Is the main focus of my life getting somewhere (work-wise? money-wise? health-wise? family-wise?). For many of us, the destination is the important thing – a promotion, a secure retirement, good health, raising the kids. How are you walking in the meantime? Who are you walking with? Are you really walking alone? Does the fact that God is with you even matter to your daily life?
- **Or** is the important thing **who** you are walking with? Whether you are at school, work, home, travelling, parenting, or resting, **God is with you**. He is more concerned with who you are becoming than what you are accomplishing. He is most interested in getting to know you and you getting to know Him. The destination may be incidental (your specific job, home, plans). The journey with is the important part.

Your journey with God (and the important people in your life) is more important than your destination.

Proverbs 3 gives us wisdom for the journey. Solomon tells us how we can walk with God.

Reflect on these verses. Who does God want you to be? How can you walk with God today?

I pause for a moment and reflect on God's life-giving presence within me.

In the whole of my life.

I need to close out the noise, to rise above the noise.

I need to listen to God again.

*In God's loving presence I unwind the past day,
starting from now and looking back, moment by moment.*

I gather in all the goodness and light, in gratitude.

*I attend to the shadows and what they say to me,
seeking healing, courage, forgiveness.*

What is stirring in me as I pray?

*I imagine Jesus himself standing or sitting at my side,
and share my feelings with him.*

Thank you, God, that I have been able to spend a few moments alone with You.

Thank You for what I have learned and how I have grown.

Amen.

Thursday, August 21: Deuteronomy 10:12-22

Micah 6:8 does not simply say "walk with God." Micah says "walk **humbly** with God."

The Hebrew word "(t)sana" – "humbly" – occurs only in this verse in the entire Bible. As scholars have tried to translate it into English they have come up with words like "humbly," "modestly," "circumspectly," "guardedly," "carefully," "advisedly," "sensibly," "reflectively," "prudently," and "with discernment."

Years ago, I took a course on the gospels with Tom (N.T.) Wright, a brilliant scholar. If I'd had opportunity to go for a walk with Professor Wright (alas, I didn't), what would that walk have looked like?

Would I have walked ahead/behind/beside him, but never talked with him? Of course not. I would have wanted to walk **"with"** him. I would want to listen to his wisdom.

The destination wouldn't have mattered. It wouldn't matter where we walked (downtown, along a river, up a hillside). **The journey** with a wise person would have been the important part.

How would we have walked? Would I have talked and talked about myself, my opinions, and what a good person I am? Or would I have asked questions? Listened? Would I have taken the opportunity to learn from a wiser person? Would I have walked (t)sana – humbly? Of course.

Imagine you have the opportunity to go for a walk with someone you respect tremendously (whoever that is). What would the walk look like? The destination would be irrelevant. The journey would be the real point. You would walk (t)sana. You would want to listen, learn, and enjoy the journey.

In Deuteronomy 10:12-22 and Micah 6:8, God is saying, "Walk with me. Walk humbly with me. It doesn't matter where we're going. It matters that we're going together." It's an invitation to a journey.

Wouldn't it be great to go for a walk with God today?

God does walk with you. Today. Everyday. Everywhere.

Am I too busy trying to get somewhere, do something, or finish some project to notice **WHO** is walking beside me every moment of every day? Am I talking too much? Am I listening to Jesus too little?

Do I need to walk – *humbly, modestly, sensibly, circumspectly, guardedly, carefully, advisedly, reflectively, prudently, with discernment* – with Jesus – today?

Lord, what I'm trying to do is set aside time to focus on my life – both temporal and spiritual.

Jesus, I try to imagine that You are sitting here beside me,

and I talk over with You what has been going on for me.

Jesus, I attempt to understand that in a myriad of ways

You enter the everyday circumstances of my existence.

But life is fast and full.

Often, pressures and commitments drown out the little voice at my core.

I know that. I want to do something about it.

Knowing that You love me unconditionally, I can afford to be honest about how I am.

How has the last day been, and how do I feel now?

Thank You, Lord, that I can share my feelings openly with You.

*How do I find myself today?
Where am I with God?
With others?
Do I have something to be grateful for? Then I give thanks.
Is there something I am sorry for? Then I ask forgiveness.
I try to become still and listen to what Your Holy Spirit is saying to me.
Thank You for these few moments spent alone with You.
Amen.*

Friday, August 22: Psalm 119:1-16

Psalm 119 is a song in praise of God and His Word, Scripture. The theme of the psalm is 119:1: *"Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD."*

If we walk according to the law of the Lord/God's principles (if we love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, soul, strength AND love our neighbour as yourself) – if we walk humbly with God – things are more likely to go well for us than if we don't. Society will be better for our humble, faithful walk with God, too.

I appreciate the psalmist's honesty in 119:5: *"Oh, that my actions would consistently reflect your decrees!"* He wants to walk with integrity and godliness. But it's hard. He fails. He doesn't use this as an excuse. Instead, it's inspiration to keep on trying: *"As I learn your righteous regulations, I will thank you by living as I should! I will obey your decrees. Please don't give up on me!"* (119:7-8).

I am not going to be perfect at walking humbly with God. I will stumble along the way. I need to keep learning and keep moving forward. How can I do that?

- By seeking to live according to God's ways. I choose to make that a priority (v.9).
- By asking for God's help. I need His Spirit's guidance and strength (v.10).
- By internalizing God's truth into my heart. I allow Jesus to shape my life (v.11).
- By celebrating God's truth as joy-full and liberating expressions of His love. His principles are NOT petty restrictions to limit my enjoyment, but wise guidance to set me free (vs.12-14).
- By taking time to think hard on what God's words mean in my life (v.15).
- By diligently reading His word and praying. I keep at it even when I don't want to (v.16).

What is God saying to you?

*Dear heavenly Father,
Slow me down.
Give me clean hands, clean words, and clean thoughts.
Help me to stand for the hard right against the easy wrong.
Save me from habits that harm.
Teach me to work as hard, and play as fair in Your sight alone,
as if the whole world saw.
Forgive me when I am unkind.
Help me to forgive those who are unkind to me.
And keep me ready to help others.
Amen*

(FYI the symbols/words dividing the psalm every 8 verses in many translations, are the letters of the Hebrew alphabet (Hebrew equivalents of "A, B, C" etc.). In Hebrew, the first word of each of the 22 sections begins with each letter, in order, of the alphabet. Today we read the "A" and "B" sections.)

Saturday, August 23: Psalm 119:97-112

We're skipping ahead in Psalm 119 (you are welcome to read it all). 119:97-104 speak about the wisdom I can gain from reflecting on His Word and walking humbly with God.

I can learn a lot from good authors, bloggers, podcasters, and even pastors. But ultimately **God Himself** is the best source of wisdom. I need to keep going back to God and His Word. These other teachers and pastors – good though they may be – cannot satisfy me like God can.

Read good books and listen to good teachers. But don't rely on them. Never let them replace the Bible. This is why I always want us to read Scripture in these guides, not other books or author.

Read and listen to Scripture, the Word of God, first.

Think about the imagery in Psalm 119:105. How have you found this to be true in your life?

Are you walking through some dark places? How can God's presence help you through?

Notice that walking humbly with God does not guarantee that things will be easy (119:107-110). But with a steadfast commitment, resolve, and determination – and the power and presence of God – we can persevere. God walks with us. God gets us through.

While **God** gifts us with **His** Spirit to empower and strengthen us, notice the importance of **our** choices and **our** determination of will: "**My** heart is set on keeping your decrees to the very end" (119:112).

When you are tempted to compromise or give up, **get stubborn with yourself**. Set your heart, resolutely, on keeping God's decrees to the very end. Don't let yourself off easy! Don't make up excuses.

Keep committed to constant and never-ending improvement, following God's way. Pray ...

*I remind myself that, as I sit here now,
God is gazing on me with love and holding me in His hands.
I pause for a moment and think of this.*

*"In these days, God taught me as a schoolteacher teaches a pupil" (Ignatius).
I remind myself that there are things God has to teach me yet,
and ask for the grace to hear them and let them change me.*

*I remind myself that I am in the presence of the Lord.
I will take refuge in His loving heart.
He is my strength in times of weakness.
He is my comforter in times of sorrow.*

*In this expectant state of mind, I turn to the text for the day with confidence.
I believe that the Holy Spirit is present and may reveal whatever the passage has to say to me.
Lord, help me read reflectively, listening with the 'ear of my heart' to what is going on in my heart.
Jesus, speak to me through the words of the Scriptures.*

*Teach me to recognize Your hand at work in my daily living.
May I respond to Your call today.
Amen.*

Sunday, August 24: Haggai 1:1-11

Written by Katelyn Entz

After having read through many of the minor prophets' messages of judgment and destruction (but also hope, grace, and justice) as the people of Judah are living captive in Babylon, we finally come to Haggai.

The Book of Haggai was written by a man named Haggai (surprise!) to the returned Jews in Jerusalem. Finally, after decades of exile in a foreign land, they have come back home! God's promises to the faithful remnant have been kept.

Imagine being deported to some foreign land with all your friends and relatives. Chances are those who were adults at the time of exile have long since passed away; it is the next generation or perhaps even the one after that returned to their homeland when given the go ahead by their foreign king.

These returned exiles have heard about the gloriousness of God's temple and of the beautiful city of Jerusalem. But everything was destroyed. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah provide a deeper glimpse at the sorrow that the returned exiles felt upon seeing their city and temple reduced to rubble.

And so they began rebuilding. However their task was not without opposition. Construction of the temple halted after the foundation was built (see Ezra 4:1-5). Years later, the prophet Haggai steps up and speaks the words of God to the people, encouraging them to continue building the house of God (Ezra 4:24-5:2).

"The word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: 'Is it a time for you yourselves to live in your paneled houses, while this house (the temple) lies in ruins?'" (Haggai 1:3)

Hey people! God says, You're living in comfort in your fancy houses, but I don't have a place to live among you. What's up with that?

Are there places where we have grown so comfortable that we neglect the presence of God in our midst? This is the challenging question that Haggai asks the returned exiles, and it is relevant for us today, too.

- Name your places of comfort to God.
- Ask him where he wants to make his presence known to you and your household.

*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;
so that, bearing about with us the infection of good courage,
we may be diffusers of life,
and may meet all ills and accidents with gallant and high-hearted happiness,
giving you thanks always for all things.
Amen*

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-94)

Monday, August 25: Haggai 1:12-15

Written by Katelyn Entz

I have had moments of deep loneliness in my walk with God. St. John of the Cross calls this "the dark night of the soul." It is a time when it feels like we are walking through a dark tunnel with no light at the end. It is

pitch black, empty, and lonely. God is nowhere to be found. We don't feel his presence. We don't see him.

Have you had moments like this?

The Jewish exiles had felt this way for a very long time. For seventy years, in fact. But after hearing the words of Haggai, something changes. The fire is lit from within. They *"obeyed the Lord their God... the people feared the Lord"* (Haggai 1:12). Obedience and fear. Both are Old Testament ways of saying that the people chose to worship and follow God wholeheartedly. Their apathy has disappeared.

In response, God says, *"I am with you—this is the Lord's declaration."* (Haggai 1:13) This is more than a brief reassurance. This is a deep reminder of God's presence with his people. It is a callback to God's words to Moses in the wilderness after Israel had left Egypt, *"My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."* (Exodus 33:14) This is the same God who was with Israel in the wilderness as they left the land of their oppressor the first time.

To a people who have endured centuries of apostasy (rejecting God) and idolatry (worshipping other gods) and then exile, this is deeply comforting. Despite their faults, God has not rejected them. This reassurance of God's presence with them spurs them on begin work on the temple. They don't merely sit back and bask in the comfort of God's words. They act.

The dark night of the soul isn't always banished easily. When we're walking the road of despair, it may be all we can do to hold onto God's promises that **he is with us** just as he has always been with his people.

- Wherever you are today, **God is with you**. How does this comfort you?
- What act of obedience can you take right now—even when you don't feel God's presence with you?

*God is here.
Before I came to this very spot, God was already here – waiting.
If God were trying to tell me something, would I know?
If God were reassuring me or challenging me, would I notice?
Conversation requires talking and listening.
As I talk to Jesus may I also learn to be still and listen.
I picture the gentleness in His eyes and the smile full of love as he gazes on me.
I can be totally honest with Jesus as I tell Him of my worries and my cares.
I will open up my heart to Him as I tell Him of my fears and my doubts.
I will ask Him to help me to place myself fully in His care, to abandon myself to Him,
knowing that He always wants what is best for me.
Thank You, God that I have been able to spend a few moments alone with You.
Amen.*

Tuesday, August 26: Haggai 2:1–5

Written by Katelyn Entz

Sometimes, we do all the right things, but nothing results out of it. We treat others kindly, only to be mistreated in return. We create something beautiful, only to have people shrug at it in indifference. We put in hours of extra work at our jobs, only to be passed over for a raise or promotion.

The returned exiles knew what it was like to work at building the temple without seeing any payoff. Oh,

sure, the building became bigger and started to look like a temple, but it was nothing like the old one.

"Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Doesn't it seem like nothing in comparison?" (Haggai 2:3) Ezra records "the older priests, Levites, and family heads, who had seen the first temple, wept loudly when they saw the foundation of this temple." (Ezra 3:12)

Ugh, that's discouraging. After all that hard work, it's only a shadow of the previous temple.

Thankfully, God doesn't stop there. *"Be strong, all you people still left in the land. And now get to work, for I am with you, says the Lord of Heaven's Armies. My Spirit remains among you, just as I promised when you came out of Egypt. So do not be afraid."* (Haggai 2:4-5)

Whether we are meandering through a dark valley or living on the mountaintop, God tells his people **not to quit out of fear**. Why? Because he is with them, and he will see it through. There we are again reminded that God never leaves or forsakes us (see Deuteronomy 31:6-8, Hebrews 13:5). The psalmist says, *"Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me."* (Psalm 23:4)

So, when your work isn't appreciated, or the new project looks nothing like that fantastic old one, or you labour without seeing any forward progress, remember that God walks beside you. Be strong. Be faithful. Don't be afraid to work hard. God will see it through.

*I slow myself down for a moment,
and try to realize that God is present.
To me. Here and now.
He is in present in what I do, in the people that I meet,
and the situations I find myself in daily.
How can I make this reality real for myself?
God, please help me to be free from my own preoccupations,
to be open to You in this time of prayer, to come to love and serve You more.
Imagining Jesus sitting or standing by me,
I speak out my feelings, as one trusted friend to another.
I thank God for these few moments spent alone with him and for any insights
I may have been given concerning the text.
Amen.*

Wednesday, August 27: Haggai 2:6-9

Written by Katelyn Entz

Yesterday, we talked about how we often work faithfully without any visible results. Today, Haggai talks about what happens when **God does his work through our actions**. The results are far greater than we could ever imagine. Look at today's passage again.

Whose work will bring God's glory to his temple? **God's**.

Not the Jews. Not mine. **God's**. **God** is the one who shakes the heavens and the earth, the oceans and the dry land. **God** is the one who shakes the nations so that they declare allegiance to him. **God** fills his house with his glory. **God** provides peace in this place.

God takes the work of his people and multiplies it, just like Jesus multiplied the bread and fish centuries

later. To all those who despaired of the temple ever being like the old one, God says, *The future of this temple will be more glorious than Solomon's temple*. Which is to say, it will be absolutely stunning.

To our modern ears, this passage can sound awfully domineering on God's part. This is where we need to put on our ancient ears and imagine how it would have sounded to the returned exiles.

They have returned, and God's presence, power, and peace have returned to the land with them! These are the things that the people had gone without while in exile. They had known only God's absence, the power of their oppressor, and war, chaos, and deportation. God's promises to see their work through to the end are a reassurance that he has returned to them; they are no longer abandoned.

However, God doesn't do the work *for* them. Haggai paints a beautiful picture of God's people participating **with him** in his work. They obey and rebuild the temple faithfully, and God promises to fill it with good things—peace and a place where all nations may bring their worship. Together, they build a place where God is made known in the land.

What work is God inviting you to join him in to bring peace to this place? How can your work be viewed as a partnership with God, where you work faithfully and God expands it beyond your wildest imagination?

*O most sweet and loving Lord,
Lift up my heart to you in heaven.
Don't let me wander aimlessly about the world.
From now on, you will be my only delight,
you alone are my food and drink,
my love and joy, my sweetness and whole good.
By your Spirit, set me fully on fire.
Amen*

Thomas À Kempis

Thursday, August 28: Haggai 2:10–14

Written by Katelyn Entz

Consider this: If a clean, sterile surgical instrument is placed in a contaminated room, does the room become clean and sterile? No, of course not.

Then, if a clean, sterile surgical instrument is placed directly on a dirty surface in a contaminated room, does the instrument become contaminated and dirty? Yes, it does.

This is essentially the question that Haggai is asking the priests, but he uses more familiar religious imagery (to them)—consecrated food (food offered to God in sacrifice) and unclean dead bodies. Through this analogy, God says, *Your attitude of selfishness in building your comfortable homes before building my temple has contaminated the entire community* (my paraphrase).

Commentator Kenneth Barker says, *"When attitudes are wrong, nothing given to God is really acceptable. So whatever these people offered was defiled."*

Jesus talks to the Pharisees about exactly this problem: *"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be*

clean." (Matthew 23:25-26)

Your actions betray what is in your heart. By delaying the building of the temple, the Jews said that God's presence really wasn't all that important to their everyday lives.

What do your actions say about what is important to you?

Bring your hesitations and doubts to God, and he will make your inner self clean. God welcomes your honest heart in whatever state you bring it to him (Psalm 51:10-12).

*Lord God, you are everything to me.
My spirit rejoices in you, my Savior.
Thank you for seeking me when I was lost and for finding me.
Without you, I can do nothing.
Thank you, Father.
You are my refuge and strength,
and because this is true, I will not fear anything or anyone.
You are here. I will not be moved.
You are always here to help me.
You are with me, Lord.
Knowing this, I will be still.
I know that you are my God.
Thank you for your constant help in my life, Lord.
Amen*

Friday, August 29: Haggai 2:15-19

Written by Katelyn Entz

Yesterday, we saw how God condemned the people's lackadaisical attitude toward building the temple, saying that they have defiled themselves by their desire for comfort.

In today's passage, God says that their pantry items—grain, wine, seed, and fruit—were cut in half *by him* to turn them back toward him in worship. While the people attempted to live in comfort, God made it more difficult for them to do so, all with the aim of turning their hearts back to him.

Passages like this are difficult. Does this mean that when the economy takes a downturn, God is punishing us? Is it a sign from the heavens that we are to return to him?

Given the state of our world, I won't say *no*, not every economic and natural disaster is directly from the hand of God. But God does take our sin seriously as we see throughout the prophets.

Sometimes, bad things happen. Within the bad thing, we have a choice—to turn toward God in trust and worship, or to turn away and build our empires of comfort, security, and stability.

Sometimes, the bad thing *is* a direct consequence of our own actions (for example, think of the rampant cultural greed that results in rapid stock market gains and crashes, which may affect national and global economies). Within the bad thing, we still have a choice—to turn toward God or turn away from him.

God says, "From this day on... *give careful thought* to the day when the foundation of the Lord's temple

was laid. *Give careful thought.*" (Hag. 2:18)

Give careful thought to your actions. Are your words, actions, work, and lifestyle choices moving you closer to the heart of God, or farther away?

*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,
not so much to be understood as to understand,
not so much to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
it is in dying that we awake to eternal life.
Amen*

Francis of Assisi

Saturday, August 30: Haggai 2:20–23

Written by Katelyn Entz

Have you noticed a pattern in Haggai? God judges his people for not rebuilding the temple. Then, when they begin the work, He promises deliverance and redemption (compare Haggai 1:1-2:9 to 2:10-23).

Twice, God promises to “shake the heavens and the earth” (Haggai 2:6, 21). Twice God promises to overthrow the nations (an Old Testament way of saying that God’s kingdom is greater than the empires and kingdoms of the world).

In our passage, God promises to make Zerubbabel, governor of Judah, his “signet ring” (Haggai 2:23).

What?

The book of Jeremiah records an instance where God removed his favour and authority from the second to last reigning king of Judah before they were exiled to Babylon. “As surely as I live,” declares the Lord, “even if you, Jehoiachin son of Jehoiakim king of Judah, were a **signet ring** on my right hand, I would still pull you off. I will deliver you into the hands of those who want to kill you, those you fear—Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and the Babylonians.” (Jeremiah 22:24-25)

The signet ring was a symbol of the crown. Judah’s kings were given God’s signet ring as a symbol of God’s favour and authority to rule. By pulling off the signet ring, God removed the king from his throne.

In Haggai, God gives the symbolic signet ring back to Zerubbabel, which means God’s divine rule is reinstated in Judah through the leadership of Zerubbabel. It is yet another symbol of God’s presence and power within the land after he returned his people from exile.

This is a message of hope! God has not given up on his people despite their sometimes-bad attitude toward him. Several hundred years later, God's kingship will be proclaimed by a descendent of Zerubbabel, Jesus of Nazareth, in new kingdom where peace is the order of the day (see Matt. 1:12-16, 5:9).

How does God's promise of hope and peace in his already-near kingdom encourage you? How can you live into this truth today?

*O gracious and holy Father, give us wisdom to perceive you,
intelligence to understand you,
diligence to seek you,
patience to wait for you,
eyes to see you,
a heart to meditate on you,
and a life to proclaim you,
through the power of the spirit of Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

Sunday, August 31: Zechariah 1:1-17

A theology professor in London, UK, took us to the Tate Modern, one of the world's premier modern art galleries. The art was ... "interesting." Everything from a broken baby carriage surrounded by garbage to a plain white canvas, 3 metres square. I couldn't understand much of it. I was happy to whisk through.

The theologian challenged us not to focus on the art. She told us to watch the people visiting. People were staring in rapt attention at the art. Did they see some hidden meaning I missed? Or did they feel like, if they looked like they understood the art, people would say, "Wow! They must be really smart. I don't get it. But they do!"? Maybe they didn't understand it any more than I did?

Some of the Bible is a bit like modern art. Books like Revelation, Daniel 7-12, Ezekiel, and Zechariah are "apocalyptic literature." They use symbolic, figurative language to express spiritual realities. Separated as we are by so much time, space, and history from the days of writers like Zechariah, his words sound strange to us. We are tempted to skip it altogether. We don't "get it." It's too abstract.

Let's give Zechariah a chance. Why?

- It **IS** God's Word to us.
- Zechariah is quoted 71 times in the New Testament (27 times in the gospels, 42 times in Revelation)
- There has always been a fascination with the "end times" – Zechariah is one text we wrestle with
- It's good to stretch our brains to try to understand (at worst, see this as an Alzheimer's prevention exercise).

Zechariah wrote his prophecy AFTER the people of Israel and Judah had been in exile in Babylon for 70 years. Their words of doom have all come to pass. Judah and Israel have been oppressed by the Babylonians for decades. Now the Jewish people returning to what was Judah and Israel. Jerusalem is in ruins. The temple is demolished. People are beginning to rebuild ...

Zechariah's visions of the rebuilding function at three levels. They refer to

- The restoration of Judah and Israel after the exile in Babylon.
- The coming of the Messiah, Jesus, and the new covenant through His blood.

- Jesus' future return – one day, someday – in glory, when all the powers of evil, sin, and death will be destroyed and we will be in God's perfect presence forever (anticipated in the Book of Revelation).

On the one hand, Zechariah's prophecy in 1:7-17 of a man among the myrtle trees is about rebuilding Jerusalem in 520 BC (the 2nd year of King Darius' reign, 1:1). For the Jews this was great news.

On the other hand, God's message is about much more than just rebuilding a physical city in the 6th century BC. God is continuing His project of saving everyone, everywhere, through the coming of a Messiah. He will build a Kingdom that transcends time and space, uniting people of all nations. This is a prophetic vision of a time when all people, from all nations will be built together into a spiritual temple:

"You are coming to Christ, who is the living cornerstone of God's temple. He was rejected by people, but he was chosen by God for great honor. And you are living stones that God is building into his spiritual temple. What's more, you are his holy priests ... For 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. 'Once you had no identity as a people; now you are God's people. Once you received no mercy; now you have received God's mercy' (see also [Hosea 1:6-9; 2:23](#))" (1 Peter 2:4-10).

This is fantastic news for all of us. *"You are the ones chosen by God, chosen for the high calling of priestly work, chosen to be a holy people, God's instruments to do his work and speak out for him, to tell others of the night-and-day difference he made for you – from nothing to something, from rejected to accepted."*

How does this inspire you? How does this invite you to live for God, today?

*God is with me, but more, God is within me, giving me existence.
Let me dwell for a moment on God's life-giving presence in my body,
my mind, my heart and in the whole of my life.*

*Help me Lord to be more conscious of your presence.
Teach me to recognize Your presence in others.
Fill my heart with gratitude for the times
Your love has been shown to me through the care of others.*

*What is stirring in me as I pray?
Am I consoled, troubled, left cold?
I imagine Jesus himself standing or sitting at my side,
and share my feelings with him.
I thank God for these few moments spent alone with him
and for any insights I may have been given concerning the text.
Amen.*

Labour Day Monday, September 1: Zechariah 3

In my university days, from May to August, I cycled 45 minutes to work. I worked as a bricklayer's helper for 8 hours (mixing "mud" – mortar – hauling mud, carrying 12-inch concrete blocks to the third floor of a school). Then I would cycle for an hour to the university. I would have a shower. Change. Swim a kilometer. Go to a night class. Then cycle half an hour home. I needed another shower.

The best parts of the day were the showers. After getting sweaty, dusty, and “muddy” it felt great to get clean and to put on clean clothes. I felt like a whole new person – with new energy, new enthusiasm, and a new identity, from labourer to student to home.

Zechariah introduces us to “Joshua/Jeshua,” the high priest in the temple that will be rebuilt in Jerusalem. The name literally means “Yahweh (the LORD) is salvation.”

- This is the same name as Joshua, Moses’ successor who led the Israelites across the Jordan into the Promised Land. The Lord is salvation.
- It is also the same name that will be given to the Messiah (Matthew 1:21). The Hebrew name “Joshua” is the Greek name “Jesus.” The name **Jesus** means “Yahweh (the LORD) is salvation” too. Interesting.

Consider this “Joshua”/“Jeshua”/“Jesus” in Zechariah. He is (falsely) accused by Satan. His clothes are filthy – in biblical imagery this means he is covered with sin and evil. But then he is given clean clothes – from head to foot. What happens to the filthy ones we don’t know, but they are never seen again.

“Joshua” and “the Branch” are one and the same (3:8). Later, in Zechariah 6:12-13, we read, “We have a man here whose name is ‘Branch.’ He will branch out from where he is and build the Temple of God. Yes, he’s the one. He’ll build the Temple of God. Then he’ll assume the role of royalty, take his place on the throne and rule – a priest sitting on the throne! – showing that king and priest can coexist in harmony.”

This sounds a lot like what Jesus does for us:

- “I will remove the sins of this land in a single day” (3:9). Sin is gone, done, finished.
- He’s building the Temple of God/the church.
- He’s our priest. Jesus brings God’s word and love to us. He brings our prayers to God.
- Jesus is our king.
- Everyone is welcome to experience God’s presence and peace: “Each of you will invite your neighbor to sit with you peacefully under your own grapevine and fig tree” (3:10).

Paul writes, “For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. And all who have been united with Christ in baptism have put on Christ, like putting on new clothes ... In Christ’s family there can be no division into Jew and non-Jew, slave and free, male and female. Among us you are all equal. That is, we are all in a common relationship with Jesus Christ” (Galatians 3:26-28).

Each of us is God’s beloved child. We are saved by God’s grace. Our sin is forgiven. We’re given “new clothes,” pure, white, and holy. We are new people through Jesus’ mercy.

First Nations, Asian, Middle Eastern, Hispanic, Black, Caucasian – everyone – we are one in Jesus.

How then should I live? How can I love my neighbour as myself?

*Thank You, thank You, thank You, generous God.
You have injected life with joy, thus we know laughter.
You have dabbed creation with colour, thus we enjoy beauty.
You have whistled a divine tune into the rhythm of life, thus we hear music.
You have filled our minds with questions, thus we appreciate mystery.
You have entered our hearts with compassion, thus we experience faith.
Thank You, God, Thank You. Thank You.
Amen.*

Tuesday, September 2: Zechariah 9:9-17

Some stories in the New Testament we know so well ... like the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem before Easter on Palm Sunday. But we usually miss the connections with Old Testament prophecies.

The Sunday before Jesus' arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection, Matthew (Matthew 21:1-9) describes how, *"As Jesus and the disciples approached Jerusalem, they came to the town of Bethphage on the Mount of Olives. Jesus sent two of them on ahead. 'Go into the village over there,' he said. 'As soon as you enter it, you will see a donkey tied there, with its colt beside it. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone asks what you are doing, just say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will immediately let you take them.'*

"This took place to fulfill the prophecy that said, 'Tell the people of Jerusalem, "Look, your King is coming to you. He is humble, riding on a donkey - riding on a donkey's colt"' (Zechariah 9:9).

"The two disciples did as Jesus commanded. They brought the donkey and the colt to him and threw their garments over the colt, and he sat on it.

"Most of the crowd spread their garments on the road ahead of him, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. Jesus was in the center of the procession, and the people all around him were shouting, 'Praise God for the Son of David! Blessings on the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Praise God in highest heaven!'"

Like Matthew, the Jewish people in Jesus' day knew their Scriptures well. They immediately make the connection between Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and the prophecy of Zechariah.

They also understood the context. [Zechariah 9:1-8](#) (read it if you wish), talks about a foreign army conquering vast territories. Most scholars link this to the conquests of Alexander the Great, whose empire, which included Israel, had been taken over by the Romans by Jesus' time.

Zechariah 9:9-17 looks forward to deliverance from foreign emperors. When Jesus comes, many people hoped the Messiah would be a political revolutionary who would overthrow the Roman government. No wonder the powers-that-be saw Him as a threat.

But the Kingdom Jesus comes to establish is NOT a physical/military state. In this "new" Jerusalem/Israel there are no weapons of war. There is freedom. There is a wonderful life.

Jesus comes to deliver us from the real enemy – our sinful natures. And He gives us freedom – freedom to be the children of God – the people we were created to be – people who come with joy and peace into God's presence any time, no matter what we've done, where we've been, or what circumstances we find ourselves in. He offers us forgiveness and hope, mercy and reconciliation, grace and a new beginning ...

- He gives us new life.
- He creates a new, inclusive kingdom for all people who love Him.

Notice this is all **GOD's** initiative and work: *"On that day the Lord their God will rescue his people, just as a shepherd rescues his sheep" (9:16).* He is the One who gives us new hope and new life. He is the One who cares for and protects His people. He creates the new kingdom.

"When the right time came," Paul says, "God sent his Son to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the

law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children. And because we are his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, 'Abba, Father.' Now you are no longer a slave but God's own child" (Galatians 4:4-7).

This is the assurance we have through the coming of the King, Jesus. We are God's beloved children.

We have a message of reconciliation, love, grace, peace, and freedom for all people.

"Shout and cheer! Raise your voice! Your king is coming! A good king who makes all things right ..."

*I arise today, through a mighty strength, the power of the Trinity,
Through the belief in the threeness,
through confession of the oneness of the Creator of Creation.
I arise today through the strength of Christ's birth and his baptism,
Through the strength of his crucifixion and his burial,
Through the strength of his resurrection and his ascension.*

*I arise today through the strength of heaven:
Light of sun, radiance of moon, splendor of fire, speed of lightning,
swiftness of wind, depth of sea, stability of earth, firmness of rock.*

*I arise today through God's strength to pilot me:
God's might to uphold me, God's wisdom to guide me,
God's eye to look before me, God's ear to hear me,
God's word to speak for me, God's hand to guard me,
God's way to lie before me, God's shield to protect me,
God's host to save me from snares of devils,
from temptations of vices, from everyone who shall wish me ill,
afar and anear, alone and in multitude.*

*Christ to shield me today.
Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me.*

*I arise today, through a mighty strength, the power of the Trinity,
Through belief in the threeness, through confession of the oneness,
of the Creator of Creation.*

Amen

Patrick (born 387?)

Wednesday, September 3: Zechariah 11:4-17

Some actors are stereotyped. Like it or not, it's hard for actors like Chuck Norris or Vin Diesel to be anything but action heroes. What's amazing is when an actor can break the mold. For instance, when *The Terminator*, Arnold Schwarzenegger, can become a lovable, nurturer in *Kindergarten Cop*.

God calls Zechariah to act out two roles for his people.

First, Zechariah is called to be a GOOD shepherd. As God's good shepherd he takes two staves – one representing **God's favour** (His covenant of love and grace), the other representing **Union** (the unity of Israel and Judah with each other and with God). He confronts the evil leaders in Judah (the three bad shepherds in 11:8 may represent the civil, religious, and military leadership).

Although Zechariah cares for the people as their good shepherd, they reject him. In the end, people choose to break God's covenant of protection and the union of Israel-Judah and union with God.

In 11:15-17, God calls Zechariah to play the role of a BAD shepherd. He is **NOT** to care for those who are dying, nor look after the young, nor heal the injured, nor feed the healthy. This is exactly how Israel's leaders are behaving. Zechariah is showing people what they're really like.

This is a direct call to people in Zechariah's day to repent and return to God.

It is ALSO a prophecy looking forward to the coming of the **truly Good Shepherd, Jesus**.

Jesus, the good shepherd comes into a world where the chief priests and Jewish leaders are bad shepherds. They have no compassion (11:5). Jesus confronts the evil shepherds – Jewish leaders. He cares for the flock in danger of being killed and oppressed, and He offers people God's amazing covenant of love and grace. Jesus calls people to be united in faith in God across ethnic and gender barriers.

In the end, the people hate Him just as they hated the good shepherd in Zechariah 11:8.

There is a sense of haggling about how much the Good Shepherd is worth: *"If you like, give me my wages, whatever I am worth; but only if you want to"* (Zechariah 11:12). Judas went to the leading priests and asked, *"How much will you pay me to betray Jesus to you?"* (Matthew 26:14-15).

"So they counted out for my wages thirty pieces of silver" (11:12) – in Judah/Israel thirty silver pieces was the price of a slave. Judas received thirty silver pieces for betraying Jesus.

"I took the thirty coins ('this magnificent sum at which they valued me' – sarcasm!) and threw them to the potter in the Temple of the Lord," says Zechariah (11:13).

Matthew comments, *"When Judas, who had betrayed Jesus, realized that Jesus had been condemned to die, he was filled with remorse. So he took the thirty pieces of silver back to the leading priests and the elders. 'I have sinned,' he declared, 'for I have betrayed an innocent man' ... Then Judas threw the silver coins down in the Temple"* (Matthew 27:3-5).

Zechariah threw his coins to a potter. Matthew writes, *"The leading priests picked up the coins. 'It wouldn't be right to put this money in the Temple treasury,' they said, 'since it was payment for murder.' After some discussion they finally decided to buy the potter's field, and they made it into a cemetery for foreigners"* (27:6-7).

When the Jewish people rejected Jesus, the age-old covenant was broken. Their unity – with one another and with God – was shattered. Foreign armies would destroy the remnants of the nation. In 70 AD, the flock really would be slaughtered as the Romans destroyed the Temple and wiped out Jewish opposition once and for all.

The details and accuracy of Zechariah's prophecy are stunning. Jesus' disciples knew Zechariah – they would have seen this drama unfold. *"The suffering flock was watching me, and they knew that the Lord was speaking through my actions"* (11:11).

His disciples would also know that Zechariah speaks of hope, too (we'll get into this more tomorrow).

Paul says: *"Is there any encouragement from belonging to Christ? Any comfort from his love? Any fellowship together in the Spirit? Are your hearts compassionate? Then make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another, and working together with one mind and purpose. Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. Don't look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too"* (Philippians 2:1-4).

The people in Zechariah's day couldn't do that. The people in Jesus' day wouldn't do that.

When I look at the world around me, do I see this lived out? Can we? Can I?

*The fruit of silence is prayer: Lord grant me silence.,
The fruit of prayer is faith: Lord, help me pray.
The fruit of faith is love: Lord, grant me faith.
The fruit of love is service: Lord, gift me with love.,
The fruit of service is peace: Lord, help me serve.
Lord, grant me your peace.
Amen*

Thursday, September 4: Zechariah 12

When George Alexander Louis Mountbatten-Windsor was born on July 22, 2013, royalists rejoiced. As the son of Prince William and Catherine, now Prince and Princess of Wales, Prince George is second in line to succeed his grandfather, King Charles III. (FYI, Charles is officially the King of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Pakistan, Ceylon, Jamaica, Barbados, the Bahamas, Grenada, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Belize, Antigua and Barbuda, and Saint Kitts and Nevis. Put that on a business card!)

Of course, Prince George is still only a child. He may well be king one day, but right now he is a twelve-year-old pre-teen. The promise of future kingship is there. But we don't expect him to be behaving too "king-ly" yet.

Zechariah 12 looks forward to a future promise too. This prophecy probably does not look forward to the geographical restoration of Israel (see verse 10). It likely looks forward to the time of ultimate renewal and restoration of God's people when Jesus returns, one day, some day.

This passage is reminiscent of other end times passages in the prophets ([Joel 3:10-16](#), [Micah 4:11-13](#)) and [Revelation 16](#): Jesus returns in glory and the ultimate, final, total destruction of evil.

In the meantime, things aren't always "kingdom-ly" either!

Zechariah 12:10 is particularly significant: *"Then I will pour out a spirit of grace and prayer on the family of David and on the people of Jerusalem. They will look on me whom they have pierced and mourn for him as*

for an only son. They will grieve bitterly for him as for a firstborn son who has died."

I'm not sure how people in Zechariah's day would have understood this verse. But for us – on this side of Jesus' crucifixion and death – we know exactly what Zechariah is talking about.

John writes, *"It was the day of preparation, and the Jewish leaders didn't want the bodies hanging there the next day, which was the Sabbath (and a very special Sabbath, because it was the Passover). So they asked Pilate to hasten their deaths by ordering that their legs be broken. Then their bodies could be taken down. So the soldiers came and broke the legs of the two men crucified with Jesus.*

"But when they came to Jesus, they saw he was already dead, so they didn't break his legs. One of the soldiers, however, pierced his side with a spear, and immediately blood and water flowed out ... These things happened to fulfill the Scriptures, 'Not one of his bones will be broken,' ([Exodus 12:46](#); [Numbers 9:12](#); [Psalm 34:20](#)) and 'They will look on the one they pierced' (Zechariah 12:10)" (John 19:31-37).

This ultimate victory is for those who mourn over the sin that took Jesus to the cross.

There is an old Christian tradition – a biblical tradition – that encourages us to reflect on the enormity of our sin and just how much it cost God to deal with it – the life of His Son, Jesus. We mourn over our sin.

Grieving over sin is not a really popular theme anymore. We like messages of joy and hope, happiness and pleasure. But maybe – every now and then – it is worth "mourning" over our sin ... Not so we become depressed. But so that we appreciate the magnitude of God's love and His amazing grace.

Mourning over our sin – mourning over Jesus' death – moves us to a deeper and more profound appreciation of God's love for us and for His creation.

"When we were utterly helpless, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners ... God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners ... 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).

As we reflect on the incredible depth of God's mercy, we discover a deep-rooted joy and immovable faith that is founded on the historical reality of Jesus' death and resurrection ...

*May there always be work for my hands to do;
May my purse always hold a coin or two;
May the sun always shine upon my windowpane;
May a rainbow be certain to follow each rain;
May the hand of a friend always be near to me, and
May God fill my heart with gladness to cheer me.
Amen.*

Friday, September 5: Zechariah 13

The Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development (LSESD) is the educational and development ministry of Baptist Churches in Lebanon. They have been on the front lines caring for refugees from Syria and Iraq. *"'You could feel the happiness in their hearts.' Marina Mardirossian co-ordinated and attended all of the Christmas meal project events that LSESD had held for refugees, but*

there was something special about the last one at the Chaldean Church in Beirut on 31 January. Over 200 Iraqi kids were there enjoying the worship, puppet show and meal before receiving food vouchers for their families. Marina sensed an overwhelming feeling of joy and appreciation from both the church and the children. 'All at the church were happy, the priests and even the head of the Chaldean Church' says Marina. 'They thanked us many times.'

"Marina tried to find out from the children why they had come from Iraq to Lebanon, but they were shy and not very forthcoming. Six-year-old Pedro didn't know why he had left. Nine year old Zeina had moved to Lebanon in November. When Marina asked her what she had done the previous Christmas, she couldn't remember anything. 'She kept saying there was bombing everywhere,' Marina says. Jinan, a nine year old girl, said her home in Iraq had been destroyed. When asked why he had come to Lebanon Samoel, a ten year old boy, simply replied 'Ethajarna,' which means they had been 'displaced' or 'kicked out'.

"These children are part of the estimated 2,500 Iraqi refugees who have fled from Iraq to Lebanon. Many have left because they were forced to leave their homes by the fundamentalist organisation Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant when they advanced into Mosul and the surrounding region last summer. Suzie Lahoud, LSESD's Community Development Program Officer, has met refugees that have escaped Iraq, including an Assyrian Church priest.

"I remember him sharing with tears in his eyes that verse, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell" [Matthew 10:28],' says Suzie. 'He quoted it in the Assyrian language they use in church, which is essentially Aramaic, the language of Christ. He said, "We had to flee but the ultimate thing is that we are still in Christ and have our faith in God." I thought that was an amazing response.'

"Unlike most Syrian refugees who want to go back once the war is over, many Iraqis feel they cannot go back. They feel like they have been expelled for good from communities their families have lived in for hundreds of years. The trauma of the upheaval they have faced has exacerbated health issues within the Iraqi community. Research carried out by LSESD among Iraqi refugees has found many are suffering from high blood pressure and chronic illnesses such as cancer, heart disease and kidney disease, which if not treated could be life threatening.

"LSESD staff visited one young girl who has Lupus, which means her family needs money to fund her treatment on a regular basis. LSESD is supporting her and ensuring her siblings get tested regularly to check that they have not contracted the illness as well. LSESD is also now providing medical aid to those that need it through two churches in Beirut that are already assisting Iraqi refugees.

"LSESD is also helping internally displaced refugees still in Iraq through a local Baptist church partner. Each month these families are receiving food aid, hygiene kits, and milk and diapers for mothers with young children, in addition to a one-time distribution of winterization items such as blankets, mattresses and heaters. Please pray for LSESD's work among Iraqi refugees, that we may be able to give children like Jinan, Zeina, Samoel and their families a more hopeful future."

Suffering is real. Pain is real. Sometimes in North America we get rather blasé about these harsh realities. Our "suffering" amounts to canceling a vacation to Arizona. People globally, our brothers and sisters, live with much harsher realities. It is into these situations that prophets, like Zechariah, speak words of hope. Christians in Gaza, Iraq, Iran, and other countries in the Middle East and North Africa resonate with the prophets.

"On that day," says Zechariah, "a fountain will be opened for the dynasty of David and for the people of Jerusalem, a fountain to cleanse them from all their sins and impurity ... I will bring that group through the fire and make them pure. I will refine them like silver and purify them like gold. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'These are my people,' and they will say, 'The Lord is our God.'"

When everything else is gone – when all our possessions are stripped away, when our safety nets have fallen apart – we always have God. Is that enough?

We also always have one another. Maybe it's in one another that we find God. What the staff and volunteers of the Lebanese (and Iraqi) Baptist churches are modelling is the unconditional, practical love of Jesus. They are the hands and feet of Jesus. As real as the suffering and pain – or even more real – is the love, grace, mercy, and compassion of God's people. Jesus is real in Lebanon.

Please do pray for opportunities to make a difference in the lives of people globally (visit www.cbmin.org to explore the possibilities). But also pray for opportunities to model God's love, grace, mercy, and compassion in our own community.

Others may experience God, in a tangible way, through you. Who can you encourage? Who could you visit? Who could you call? Who could you love in Jesus' name?

*Dearest Lord, may I see you today and every day in the person of your sick,
and, while nursing them, minister unto You.
Though you hide yourself behind the unattractive disguise
of the irritable, the exacting, the unreasonable,
may I still recognize you, and say:
"Jesus, my patient, how sweet it is to serve You."*

*O God, while you are Jesus, my patient,
be to me a patient Jesus, bearing with my faults,
looking only to my intention, which is to love and serve You
in the person of each one of Your sick.
Lord, increase my faith, bless my efforts and work, now and for evermore,
Amen.*

Mother Teresa (1910-1997)

Saturday, September 6: Malachi 1

Our Bibles are anthologies of 66 different books written by different human authors, at different times, and in different genres (history, letters, poetry, prophecy). The themes are consistent. God – the divine author of all Scripture – doesn't change. Neither do His principles.

The book of Malachi begins with a wonderful statement of God's love: *"'I have loved you,' says the LORD."* Isn't that great news? God says that in every book of the Bible. He says that to us today, too.

People back then asked, *"How have you loved us?"* God talks about how He protected the Israelites from their enemies.

If we were to ask God, *"How have you loved us?"* how would He answer?

He would remind us of Jesus – His life, His death, His resurrection. He would remind us of His grace and

mercy. His forgiveness. His new life now, and in the future. He would remind us of the gift of the Holy Spirit. He would remind us of His faithfulness to us. He would remind us of answered prayers. What else?

How has God loved your family? You, personally?

These people might have intellectually known God loved them (or not). They certainly didn't love God or know God in their hearts. They didn't live out their faith in God. Their leaders were corrupt. They brought offerings to the temple people thought they were fit for almighty God, but would never have been accepted by human, pagan governors. *"Cursed is the cheat ..."* (1:14). Harsh words.

Every Spring is tax time. Reluctantly, we give the least possible to the Canada Revenue Agency. What do we give to the God who loves us? Who gave His only Son for us? Who cares for us day by day? Do we honour the Lord with the first and best of our income? Or is He even lower on our priority list than the CRA?

God loved us so much He gave us His Son ... Honestly, what do I offer Him in response? How do I show my love for Him?

If God were to ask us, *"How have you loved me?"* how would I answer?

This is something to pray through ...

*When I am invited into the presence of a friend,
I look forward to the event and feel honoured.
When God invites me to spend time in His presence,
He desires me to know and feel His love.
With faith and hope I turn my heart and mind to God,
and ask Him to help me become more aware of His loving presence.
I thank God for these few moments spent alone with him
and for any insights I may have been given from His Word.
Amen.*

Sunday, September 7: Malachi 2:1-9

We live in God's grace. Through Jesus' death our sins are forgiven. This is good news. Great news.

This doesn't mean we have license to do evil things. As Paul will write, *"Since God's grace has set us free from the law, does that mean we can go on sinning? Of course not! Do not let sin control the way you live; do not give in to sinful desires. Do not let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin. Instead, give yourselves completely to God, for you were dead, but now you have new life. So use your whole body as an instrument to do what is right for the glory of God."*

"Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace. Don't you realize that you become the slave of whatever you choose to obey? You can be a slave to sin, which leads to death, or you can choose to obey God, which leads to righteous living." (Romans 6:15, 12-14, 16)

In Malachi, God is pointing out some of the issues among God's people. While the Lord's words are spoken specifically to the Jewish priests, all of us do well to hear what He might be saying to us:

- They have not set their hearts to honour the Lord. What does it mean for me to set my heart to honour the Lord? Do I do that? In what ways? How can I do so more and more?
- They were to share God's life and peace. They didn't. How can I be a person of life and peace?
- They were to revere God and stand in awe of His name. They didn't. How can I do that?
- They were to give true instruction and preserve knowledge. They didn't. How can I do that?
- Nothing false was to be found on their lips. They lied. How can I be a person of truth?
- They were to walk with God in peace and uprightness. They didn't. How can I do that?
- They were to turn many from sin. How am I doing at being "well-spoken of by everyone"? Does my lifestyle honour God? Or do I fall short?

These are things to reflect on. It is good to do some soul-searching. It is good to confess our sins to God.

As people of the resurrection, we don't need to feel guilty or condemned. We confess our sins. We make our lives right with God. We do it to receive the gift of God's grace. We do it to know God's joy. We do it to live the lives God created us to live. And we do it to share the love, mercy, grace, and forgiveness of God with those around us.

"If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all wickedness" (1 John 1:8-9).

Praise God.

*For a few moments, I think of God's veiled presence in all things:
in the elements, giving them existence;
in plants, giving them life; in animals, giving them sensation;
and finally, in me,
giving me all this and more, making me a temple, a dwelling-place of the Spirit.*

*If God were trying to tell me something, would I know?
If God were reassuring me or challenging me, would I notice?
I ask for the grace to be free of my own preoccupations
and open to what God may be saying to me.
Lord, grant me the grace to be free from the excesses of this life.
Let me not get caught up with the desire for wealth.
Keep my heart and mind free to love and serve you.
Amen*

Monday, September 8: Malachi 3:1-6

In Malachi's world, people make evil choices. Bad things happen. Then people weary God by asking, *"Where is the God of justice?"* (2:17). They really have no one but themselves to blame.

Do you ever ask, "Where is the God of justice?" Do you ever wonder where God is when things are not going well? When life seems unfair? When evil people prosper? When the world is in chaos?

It's not always our fault. Sometimes bad things happen that are out of our control.

Malachi 3 begins with a promise – *"I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me."* This is a promise quoted by Matthew, Mark, and Luke to describe John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus.

Malachi goes on, *"Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple."* This is not about John the Baptist anymore. Change is coming. Justice is coming. The Messiah is coming. Jesus is coming. He is "the Lord." The earth is "His" temple (Genesis 1). (How, then, should we treat His temple, His creation?)

As we have noted before with prophetic words, it is difficult to know if 3:2-5 refer to the first coming of Jesus (His life as recorded in the gospels) OR refer to His second coming, in judgment, in the future.

Aspects of this cleansing were true of Jesus' earthly ministry. But ultimately, this will only be fulfilled when Jesus returns. The Kingdom of God has come, but we await its fulfillment.

"Where is the God of justice?" Malachi answers: He is here. He has come in Jesus. He is among us as the Holy Spirit. He is here in His people, filled with His Spirit.

Jesus' promise is that **He IS with us now and always** to the end of the age (Matthew 28:19-20). We never have to feel alone, abandoned, or separated from God. He is not leaving us – ever. Now we, in fact, are God's presence here on earth. *"Where is the God of justice?"* He is with us. He is within in us!

There is also a challenge: *"I'm on my way to visit you with Judgment. I'll present compelling evidence against sorcerers, adulterers, liars, those who exploit workers, those who take advantage of widows and orphans, those who are inhospitable to the homeless – anyone and everyone who doesn't honor me"* (3:5).

Hopefully none of us are sorcerers or adulterers. "Liars"/"perjurers" (literally "false swearers") covers everything from "white lies" to perjury in court ... hmmm? Am I scrupulously honest in my financial dealings (income tax)? Do I care about justice for all people, locally and globally? As a society, do we care well for the poor/the homeless/people with disabilities/refugees/those in need?

We are all saved by Jesus' death on the cross; our sins are paid for. *"I am God – yes, I Am. I haven't changed. And because I haven't changed, you haven't been destroyed"* (3:6). Our good news is that God, in His mercy saves us as we put our faith in Him. That is His promise. That never changes.

We are called to live before the Lord with humility, integrity, holiness, mercy, and righteousness. How am I doing? God knows I won't be perfect, but He invites me to strive to be the person He created me to be ...

*Help us, O Lord, to know you, and love you, and rejoice in you.
Even though we know we cannot do these perfectly in this life,
let us, at least, grow closer to you every day,
till we come to know, love, and rejoice in you in perfection, in heaven.
May our knowledge of you increase in us, day by day.
May our love for you grow every day more and more.
May our joy become greater and fuller as we live in your presence each day.
May the gifts of grace you give us fill us so that our joy may be full.
To you, O Lord, be the honor and glory,
who with the Father and Holy Spirit lives and reigns,
one God, world without end.
Amen*

Augustine (354-430)

Tuesday, September 9: Malachi 3:6-18

God says to His people (us):

- *"I am God – yes, I Am. I haven't changed. And because I haven't changed, you haven't been destroyed."* That's great news.
- But ... *"**You** have a long history of ignoring my commands. You haven't done a thing I've told you. Return to me so I can return to you."*
- *"You ask, 'But how do we return?'"*
- *"'Begin by being honest. Do honest people rob God? But you rob me day after day.'*
- *"You ask, 'How have we robbed you?'"*
- *"'The tithe and the offering – that's how!'"*

Malachi takes the Israelites to task over tithing: giving to God the first portion of our incomes. *"Will you rob God?"* is about as blunt an introduction to the topic of stewardship and offerings as you can get.

"Robbing" means taking what is not mine. "Robbing" also means keeping for myself what rightfully is due someone else. In Malachi's world, one tenth of a person's income was due to God (for example, see [Genesis 14:19-20](#), [Deuteronomy 14:22-26](#)). Failure to do that was to "rob" from God. That's serious.

In our culture, we resent being told there might be a percentage we should give to the Lord. In Christ, we are "free" of all these Old Testament laws, aren't we? We are saved by grace not the Law.

Yes, we are free of the legalistic 10% law in the Old Testament.

I have noticed that some people who are most outspoken about "not being under the law" claim this freedom so they can do whatever **they** want to do. In the case of tithing, those who reject this 10% principle usually do so because they want to give far less than 10%. It's **their** money. They don't want to give it to anyone, least of all God.

Some people spend an inordinate amount of time and energy worrying about their finances (Scripture has lots of warnings about this, e.g. [Matthew 19:23-24](#)). We can be wealthy and not be content, joyful, loving, godly people. (In our age of billionaires, do you sense they are content, joyful people?)

Jesus sets us free from legalisms in the Old Testament, so we are free to be even **more** generous. The people who are the most generous givers, do so freely – often well beyond the 10% principle. These folks often are the most joyful, pleasant, content, godly people I know. God loves a cheerful giver.

Reportedly, as a youth, John Wesley began working for £150 a year. He gave £10 to the Lord. His salary was doubled the second year, but Wesley continued to live on £140, giving £160 to Christian work. During his third year, Wesley received £600. He kept £140 while £460 were given to the Lord. Interesting.

Paul writes, in 1 Timothy 6:6-10, *"True godliness with contentment is itself great wealth. After all, we brought nothing with us when we came into the world, and we can't take anything with us when we leave it. So if we have enough food and clothing, let us be content."*

*"But people who long to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many foolish and harmful desires that plunge them into ruin and destruction. For the **love** of money is the root of all kinds of evil. And some people, craving money, have wandered from the true faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows."*

It is more blessed to give than to receive (or to hold on to everything). What is God saying to you?

*Dear Lord, as I come to you today
fill my heart and my whole being with the wonder of Your presence.
It is so easy to get caught up with the trappings of wealth in this life.
Grant, O Lord, that I may be free from greed and selfishness.
Remind me that the best things in life are free:
love, laughter, caring and sharing.*

*In Your loving presence I unwind the past day,
starting from now and looking back, moment by moment.
I gather in all the goodness and light, in gratitude.
I attend to the shadows and what they say to me,
seeking healing, courage, forgiveness.*

*Conversation requires talking and listening.
As I talk to Jesus may I also learn to be still and listen.
I can be totally honest with Jesus as I tell Him of my worries and my cares.
I will open up my heart to Him as I tell Him of my fears and my doubts.
I will ask Him to help me to place myself fully in His care, to abandon myself to Him,
knowing that He always wants what is best for me.
Amen*

Wednesday, September 10: Romans 8:1-11

The Ontario Provincial Police officer who stopped me for speeding along the Trans Canada Highway in Northern Ontario claimed I was doing 117 km/h in a 90 km/h zone. I was tempted to argue that it was physically impossible for a fully loaded 1981 diesel Volkswagen Rabbit to do 117 km/h (it was crammed with all my worldly possessions). Then I remembered I had just come down a long, steep hill. Yes, it was conceivably possible I achieved such a stunning speed in a Rabbit. I was guilty. I was hoping for a warning. But no, I got a ticket for \$35 (this was back in the mid-1980's).

I was moving from Nova Scotia back to BC. The ticket informed me that, if I wanted to contest the charge, I had to appear in court in person, in White River Ontario, in 6 weeks. That was impossible. The alternative was to pay a fine. I mailed in my cheque.

When we break the law, there are consequences. Sometimes other people are seriously injured. Sometimes we hurt ourselves. Sometimes we have to "pay the price" (\$35 to the Ontario government).

Paul reminds us what the prophets have been telling us. We all mess up. We make mistakes. We deserve punishment. But, he says, we are forgiven through Jesus. *"Now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus"* (8:1). We don't have to pay the price we deserve. Jesus has paid it for us.

The challenge for us, then, is to *"no longer follow our sinful nature but instead follow the Spirit"* (8:4).

John writes, *"God has given us his Spirit as proof that we live in him and he in us. Furthermore, we have seen with our own eyes and now testify that the Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. All who declare that Jesus is the Son of God have God living in them, and they live in God. We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in his love."*

"God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. And as we live in God, our love grows more perfect. So we will not be afraid on the day of judgment, but we can face him with confidence because we live like Jesus here in this world" (1 John 4:13-17).

May God help us live like Jesus here in this world. What does that mean for me?

*As I come to prayer, God is present waiting for me.
God always arrives before me, desiring to connect with me even more than my most intimate friend.
I take a moment and greet my loving God.
I ask for the grace to let go of my own concerns and be open to what God is asking of me,
to let myself be guided and formed by my loving Creator.
How do I find myself today?
Where am I with God?
With others?
Do I have something to be grateful for? Then I give thanks.
Is there something I am sorry for? Then I ask forgiveness.
Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end.
Amen.*

Thursday, September 11: Romans 8:12-17

One of the oldest excuses in the book is *"The Devil made me do it."*

Actually, the Devil can't **MAKE** you do a single thing. He can tempt you. He can mislead you. He can try to trick you. But he has no power to **MAKE** you do anything wrong. You can't blame the Devil (C.S. Lewis has a brilliant book, *The Screwtape Letters* – letters from a senior devil to a junior tempter on how to trip us up; it's an insightful look into how we easily go astray). Unfortunately, we're on our own when we mess up.

As people living in God's Spirit, however, we can resist the Devil's temptations. The Holy Spirit is within us (Romans 8:5-11). And, Paul reminds us, we are daughters and sons of the King of Kings, God Himself. We have the privilege of coming into our Father's presence, to openly and freely talk with Him. He is our "Abba" – the Aramaic word for "Daddy" – our loving, heavenly Father who cares for us intimately. We can bring all our cares, dreams, concerns, worries, hopes, and fears to Him. He loves to talk with us.

When you're tempted – pray. When you feel discouraged – pray. When you're joyful – pray. When you're encouraged – pray. When you're suffering – pray. *"Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus"* (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). How is God speaking to you, today? What do you need to pray about?

*"The world is charged with the grandeur of God" (Gerard Manley Hopkins).
I dwell for a moment on the presence of God around me,
in every part of my body, and deep within my being.
You are my strength in times of weakness.
You are my comforter in times of sorrow.
Lord God, I thank you for the gift of freedom.
Help me to use this gift with integrity.
I am free to make choices.
Help me to choose to follow you, to live in a Christian way by caring for others.
Remind me to consider always those less fortunate than myself,
the oppressed, the prisoner,
those who are not free to worship in public.
Guide me always to seek your holy will in all the events of my life.
Amen*

Friday, September 12: Romans 8:18-25

[Fern Canyon](#), off the beaten path in Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park, California, is a 16 km detour down a gravel road. The deep canyon is a spectacular sight, a hidden paradise of ferns lining a narrow gorge carved out by Home Creek. Some of the seven different types of ferns clinging to the steep cliffs are species 325 million years old. Living underneath their leafy shade are rare amphibians, including Pacific giant salamanders, measuring up to 30 cms in length.

The trail through Fern Canyon follows a series of small footbridges deep into the gorge. Lush, drooping ferns create hanging gardens, miniature waterfalls pour down rock faces, and moss wallpapers every surface. The walls grow taller and squeeze tighter as you travel. It feels primeval. Steven Spielberg filmed a scene for *Jurassic Park II* in this canyon for that reason.

Most people drive right past it.

Romans 8:18-25 is one of those passages we often drive right past in Romans. But, like Fern Canyon, this passage is well worth a stop. Paul is teaching us that all creation has been affected by human sin.

Creation is waiting for

- God's people to **be** God's people here and now, and
- for Jesus' return when all things will be completely and finally restored.

God's good news is about more than just people and their "salvation" – it's about the rescue and restoration of **ALL** creation. Through Jesus, God is making **ALL** things new – not just human beings.

As humans we naturally focus on the "people part" of the good news – especially the **personal** people part: *I* am saved/**you** are saved by the grace of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus. That is great news. Fantastic news.

But God is in the process of redeeming **ALL** of His creation – not just us and not just people. That makes some people a little bit queasy: isn't the good news **ONLY** about **us**? Romans 8 – and many other passages in Scripture – challenge us to see God is more than big enough to renew absolutely everything. God is dealing with **ALL** of the consequences of evil – in my personal life, in human society, in His natural creation, and much more. I can't understand all that. But it's wonderful.

*"**All creation** is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are ..."* (8:19) In others words, all of creation is waiting for us – God's children (8:1-18) – to **BE** God's children. We need to step up and take up the mantle for which were created: to share His good news, to care for people's needs, to be people of justice and mercy, to be wise stewards of God's creation, and much more.

Before sin ever entered the world, people – you and I – were placed in God's perfect garden, *"to tend and watch over it"* (Genesis 2:15). We were created to help bring order, peace, and harmony to all of God's creation. That fundamental mandate – part of our core reason for being as creatures made in "the image of God" – has never been revoked. That is still our purpose as renewed, restored, saved people.

Some practical thoughts for all of us:

- **Care for people.** Be kind. Serve others. Love your neighbour as yourself.
- Try to think and talk about "**God's creation**" – you begin to look at the world differently ... this is not

- an “environment” to be exploited, but God’s creation to be nurtured.
- Reduce, reuse, recycle – **this is God’s creation**. As Christians we should be the most environmentally conscious people around (certainly not the least) – we live in God’s art gallery.
- Be aware of how much “stuff” you use in a day – water, gas, food, waste, energy – and try to reduce it, a little bit (or a lot) ...

Think about some of the BIG issues regarding God’s creation today: climate change ... carbon emissions ... waste disposal ... air and water pollution ... How should the people of God respond?

*Open my heart, O Lord, and enlighten me by the grace of your Holy Spirit,
that I may seek what is well pleasing to your will;
help me to order my doings after your commandments that I may live a life that pleases you.
May God the Father bless us.
May Christ the Son take care of us.
May the Holy Spirit and enlighten us all the days of our life.
The Lord be our defender and keeper of body and soul
both now and forever and to the ages of ages.
Amen*

Bede (672-735)

Saturday, September 13: Romans 8:26-30

My friend, Harv, and I were following the Opal Peak Trail in Jasper National Park. We decided to push higher than the official trail to a col from which we could look into the neighbouring valley.

We weren’t in great shape; we were poorly prepared (no water, only a bag of ginger snaps). We did push on. When we reached the ridge, the view took our breath away. A hidden valley with ridge after ridge of peaks spread out before us. We were speechless. How many people had actually seen this beauty before?

Paul wants us to be in that place after Romans 8:18-25. After he has told us that that ALL creation is waiting for the people of God to actually **BE** the people of God, to be God’s good news in the world, he intends us to be a bit speechless. The good news is far bigger than we might have imagined. It’s about loving people. It’s also about caring for **ALL** creation. So what do we do? How do we begin to respond?

“The Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness, “ Paul says. “For example, we don’t know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words ...” (8:26). God can help us work through how we respond to this amazing love, the amazing grace of Jesus.

“We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them” (8:28).

Note: Paul does NOT say “God causes all things that happen to us.” He does say, “When things happen to you, God can work them together for good ...” There is a BIG difference in those statements. Bad things do happen. There is death and decay (8:21). Creation does groan (8:22). But God can bring good things, even out of the most desperate circumstances.

“For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son ...” (8:29). We are called to be like Jesus. On the one hand, this means we have *“right standing with God”* (8:30). On the other hand, this means we have the same mission Jesus has: to be God’s ambassadors, bringing His good news of love, forgiveness, mercy, justice, and hope to a hope-starved world (8:19).

We are lights shining in the darkness of a dying world. *"You are the light of the world – like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father"* (Matthew 5:14-16).

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

Unknown

Sunday, September 14: Romans 8:31-39

This will be my (Bruce's) last devotion. It's been a wonderful twenty-year run. Thank you for joining me on these journeys through God's Word. Please, keep reading.

- It's good for First Baptist Church, Lethbridge, to move on with new leadership and vision.
- It's good for me to move on, too. I will be serving as Western Canada Representative with Canadian Baptist Ministries (our overseas mission partner) for a couple of years.

I want to leave you with Romans 8.

It's a wonderful celebration of the life we have in Jesus, in the Spirit, in the Father's love.

And, it's a wonderful reminder that no one and nothing can ever separate us from Jesus. We are safe, right now and forever, in His hands. We need never be afraid of being all alone.

"I am with you always," Jesus promises, *"even to the end of the age"* (Matthew 28:20).

Jesus also wants us to know that nothing can overpower us. We may face storms, temptations, suffering, hardship, and all kinds of evil, but Jesus can get us through.

Notice, some of these things may, in fact, happen to us.

Jesus will help us make it through.

What good news from this passage do I need to hear, today?

*Disturb us, Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves,
When our dreams have come true because we have dreamed too little,
When we arrived safely because we sailed too close to the shore.*

*Disturb us, Lord, when, with the abundance of things we possess
we have lost our thirst for the waters of life.*

*Disturb us, when, having fallen in love with life,
we have ceased to dream of eternity.*

*Disturb us, in our efforts to build a new earth,
we have allowed our vision of the new Heaven to dim.*

*Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly,
To venture on wider seas where storms will show your mastery,
where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars.*

*We ask You to push back the horizons of our hopes
and push us into the future in strength, courage, hope, and love.
Amen*

Sir Francis Drake