

2024 Lenten Season Reflections

"A Time For Reflection and Renewal"



St. John's United Church of Christ

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*"No Matter Who Are or
Where You Are on Life's Journey,
You Are Welcome Here"*



St. John's Sanctuary Cross

Pastor: Rev. Caroline E. Saxton

Schedule:

8:45 a.m. Church school

10:00 a.m. Traditional Worship in Sanctuary*
Music by Senior Choir

10:00 a.m. Contemporary Worship in Sanctuary* (3rd Sunday)
Music by Praise Band

5:30 p.m. Contemporary Worship in Fellowship Hall (2nd Saturday)
Music by Praise Band

**Services are Live Streamed*

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Pastor Caroline's Welcome / Booklet Design Intent / Acknowledgements

Dear Church Family,

As we enter into the liturgical season of Lent, we enter into a time of spiritual renewal, drawing closer to God and inviting God to draw closer to us. Lent is a season of preparation, the 40 days (plus Sundays) that lead us from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday. Some of the traditional ways we observe Lent are to pray, fast, and to give alms (donations) to the poor. You may give something up for Lent; alternatively, you may take on a new spiritual practice of discipline. This booklet came about as a way to go deeper into Lent, to journey with Jesus from lament to joy, and to do so together.

The idea for this project was sparked by the desire to deepen our spiritual life (spiritual deepening is one of the themes of our strategic plan) and to provide a tangible, personal resource to our members and friends in the Lenten season. You may learn something new, find an additional perspective to consider, and be moved by the testimony of those who have contributed a reflection from their personal spiritual journey. This booklet is unique to St. John's UCC and we give thanks for those who have shared their time, talent and treasure to make this project a reality.

I think of my favorite Lenten hymns, those that have deep meaning and memory for me. Music is indeed like praying twice. One of my favorite hymns for Ash Wednesday is "I Take the Cross of Jesus Christ" as we remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return. I also believe that we are loved and to love we shall return—for God is love. I associate "Were You There" and "Wondrous Love" most strongly with Holy Week, when we consider Jesus' suffering and death on the cross for us, for the whole world. I invite you to consider adding music and art to your Lenten practice, inspired by your own journey and the contents of this booklet. Who knows? Maybe you'll add a new dimension to your walk with Jesus.

Our Lenten disciplines take many forms. I personally like this approach to fasting, as put forth by Pope Francis and which I shared with my dad several years ago:

"Fast from hurting words and say kind words. Fast from sadness and be filled with gratitude. Fast from anger be filled with patience. Fast from pessimism and be filled with hope. Fast from worries and have trust in God. Fast from complaints; contemplate simplicity. Fast from pressures and be prayerful. Fast from bitterness; fill your hearts with joy. Fast from selfishness and be compassionate. Fast from grudges and be reconciled. Fast from words; be silent and listen."

I do not recall where I came across the following quote, or who wrote it, but it is one that I am adding to my own Lenten practice this year:

"You are worth the quiet moment. You are worth the deeper breath. You are worth the time it takes to slow down, be still, and rest."

May your journey this Lent indeed be a blessed one!

Peace,

Pastor Caroline

Booklet Design Intent. The content of this booklet was designed with several objectives in mind. First and foremost the content was selected to provide some historical perspective on Lenten Season, as well as contemplative information to encourage and invite readers to reflect on their personal spiritual journey. A second objective was to have some members of the congregation share thoughts about their personal spiritual journey that might be helpful and encouraging to others. Finally, there are numerous "Spiritual Nuggets" dispersed throughout the booklet that hopefully will cause the reader to pause and reflect.

Acknowledgements. Thanks to the members of the "Wired Word" Sunday School Class who volunteered to prepare a personal reflection. Thanks to the following people for reviewing and commenting on portions of booklet: John Campbell, Harold Collier, Gary Crum, Connie Kaiser, and Pastor Caroline. Thanks to Dale Myers for planning, designing, gathering content, editing, assembling and formatting the booklet. Finally, thanks to Loretta Zimmerman, Office Manager, and Heather Nickey, Office Assistant, for coordinating the publishing of the booklet.

February 12: Historical Perspective on Lenten Season

PURPOSE:

The highlight of the year for Christians is Easter, the day when Christians believe that Jesus rose from the dead. Lent is a forty-day period prior to Easter when Christians prepare themselves to receive God's grace and forgiveness that he offered to us on Easter Sunday.

Lent is an opportunity not an obligation. It is not commanded by our Lord, nor is it even mentioned in the Bible. Though the Bible does not mention Lent, it has been a custom, which Christians have practiced, for most of the last two thousand years. This custom was virtually universal in Christendom until the Protestant Reformation. Some Protestant churches do not observe Lent, but many do. Those Christians who observe it do so because they find it a helpful opportunity for repentance, renewal, and for the strengthening of their faith.

Though Jesus recommends and comments on the Lenten practices such as fasting, almsgiving, and prayer in his Sermon on the Mount [\[Matthew 6:1-18\]](#), these practices can easily become legalistic rituals:

Giving to the Needy

"Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven. ² "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ³ But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴ so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Prayer

*⁵ "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. ⁷ And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸ Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. ⁹ "This, then, is how you should pray:
"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, ¹⁰ your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹ Give us today our daily bread. ¹² And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. ¹⁴ For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*

Fasting

¹⁶ "When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show others they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward in full. ¹⁷ But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ so that it will not be obvious to others that you are fasting, but only to your Father, who is unseen; and your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

If during Lent, Christians choose to give up something or rededicate themselves to helping those in need as a way to proclaim the salvation Christ has won for all by His suffering and death, then don't such activities glorify God? However, it is essential to remember that nothing we do through self-denial or good works can ever earn God's forgiveness or repay Him for what He accomplished for us. **Lent is not so much about our giving up something to please God. Lent is about what Jesus Christ gave up to pay the penalty for the sins of the world—His holy and innocent life.**

Lent prepares us for the observance of Jesus Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection for us. Many early Christians were baptized on Easter Sunday, so Lent became a special time of study and prayer in preparation for their baptisms. As time passed, the entire congregation joined in the study and prayer as they looked forward to the anniversary of their baptisms on Easter.

Therefore, Lent has become a season of repentance and sorrow for sin. It is a time of:

- **Self-examination** of one's spiritual journey,
- **Giving up** of sinful behavior,
- **Recommitment to the new life** of Christ begun in baptism,
- **Disciplined study** of Scripture,
- **Growing in faith.**

Lent is a **time to reflect** on the impact that our baptism has had on our lives, and to ask ourselves how we are doing on our faith journey. But most of all, it is a **time of renewal** and new beginnings, as we, through faith, apply the complete forgiveness won by Christ's death to our lives. **Lent heightens our awareness that we desperately need Jesus Christ!**

Here are a few typical questions that readers might pray and meditate on during Lent:

- Am I gladly sharing the blessing that God has given me with others—especially the stranger and the poor?
- Do I have a gracious and patient attitude with others—especially those who irritate me?
- Do I feel the power of connection to God and the church in corporate worship?
- How is my devotional and prayer life progressing? Am I listening to God more and complaining less? Is it time for a change or a growth in my Bible study and prayer life?
- Am I as thoughtful and forgiving of family as others, or do I take my frustrations out on them?
- Do I speak up for the maligned and oppressed? Or do I remain silent in order to remain popular?

SPECIAL DAYS:

The season of Lent includes several special religious days:

- Ash Wednesday – marks the beginning of the Lenten season.
- Palm Sunday – marks the beginning of Holy Week and commemorates the entrance of the messiah into Jerusalem riding on a donkey.
- Maundy Thursday – the day Christians commemorate the Last Supper shared by Christ with his disciples.
- Good Friday – the day on which Christians remember the crucifixion and burial of Jesus.

TIME FRAME:

Conventionally, the Season of Lent is described as being forty days long, though different denominations calculate the forty days differently. Why forty days? The forty days represent the time that, according to the Bible, Jesus spent in the desert before the beginning of his public ministry, where he fasted and endured temptation by Satan. **By observing the forty days of Lent, the individual Christian imitates Jesus' withdrawal into the wilderness for forty days.**

However, just to confuse things, Lent is actually 46 calendar days rather than 40 days. Why? Because the forty days of Lent are intended to be days of discipline and self-restraint (i.e., fasting). But Sunday, the day designated by Christians as the Lord's Day, should never be a day of fasting; it is intended to be a day of celebration — a commemoration of the Resurrection. So each Sunday during the season of Lent, Christians suspend Lenten disciplines and celebrate. We therefore skip Sundays when calculating the 40 days. Lent is forty "fasting" days spread out over a total of 46 calendar days beginning at midday on *Ash Wednesday*, the seventh Wednesday before Easter. In 2024, Lent begins on March 14.

In many countries, people celebrate the day before the start of the Lenten season (called Mardi Gras, Fat Tuesday, Shrove Tuesday, Carnival, or Fasching) with a "last fling" eating up everything good in the house that they believe was inappropriate to eat during the solemnity of Lent. This celebration has expanded into all sorts of festivals all over the world, although most modern Christians do eat some—or all—of those foods during Lent. In many languages, the word "Lent" actually means "fast." This is where the custom of giving up something for Lent originated. For centuries, it was customary to fast by abstaining from meat during Lent, which is why some people call the festival *Carnival*, which is Latin for *farewell to meat*.

LITURGICAL COLORS:

- In most churches, the decorations are **purple**, the royal color, to prepare for the King.
- **Black**, the somber color of mourning and sorrow for sin, is reserved for *Good Friday* and *Ash Wednesday*.
- For the period from *Palm Sunday* through *Maundy Thursday* some churches use **scarlet**, an intense variant of purple and **red** that symbolizes the life-giving blood of Christ.

Spiritual Nugget #1

*Faith doesn't always take you out of the problem.
Faith takes you through the problem.*

*Faith doesn't always take away the problem.
Faith gives you the ability to handle the pain.*

*Faith doesn't always take you out of the storm.
Faith calms you in the midst of the storm.*

February 13: Historical Perspective on Shrove Tuesday



Shrove Tuesday occurs the first Tuesday before Ash Wednesday. It officially ends the season of Epiphany and is the vigil for the starting of Lent.

Traditionally viewed as a day of repentance, Shrove Tuesday has become the last day for celebration and feasting before the period of fasting that many Christians practice during the Lenten season. The name "Shrove Tuesday" is derived from the word "shrive", which means to confess and receive absolution. The name denotes a period of cleansing, wherein a person brings their lusts and appetites under subjection through abstention and self-sacrifice.

Ironically, Shrove Tuesday has evolved into a day of frivolity and indulgence, during which people participate in as much pleasure and self-gratification as they can before Lent begins. For many Protestant believers, Shrove Tuesday holds no particular significance. For Catholics and Anglicans, however, the day is still observed with confession and absolution, in addition to modest feasting and rejoicing.

THE ORIGINS OF SHROVE TUESDAY

Shrove Tuesday originated during the Middle Ages. As in contemporary times, food items like meats, fats, eggs, milk, and fish were regarded as restricted during Lent. To keep such food from being wasted, many families would have big feasts on Shrove Tuesday in order to consume those items that would inevitably become spoiled during the next forty days.

Originally beginning on Sunday, Shrove Tuesday was a three-day celebration that culminated in large feasts on Tuesday night. The three days before Ash Wednesday are also known as **Shrovetide** ("shrove" is an Old English word meaning "to repent"). The Tuesday just before Ash Wednesday is called **Shrove Tuesday**, or is more popularly known by the French term **Mardi Gras**, meaning "**Fat Tuesday**," contrasting to the fasting during Lent.

Carnival became associated with Shrove Tuesday, in part from the Spring Equinox celebrations that were practiced by the Romans and the ancient tribes of Europe. The word "carnival" comes from the Latin *carne(m) levare*, meaning "*to take away the flesh*" or "*removal of meat*." Some traditions count Carnival as the entire period of time between Epiphany and Ash Wednesday. The English tradition of eating pancakes on Shrove Tuesday came about as a way to use as much milk, fats, and eggs as possible before Ash Wednesday began.

Many Christians' discomfort with Lent originates with a distaste associated with Mardi Gras. It was mostly as a result of the Carnival celebrations that the Church restricted the observance to a single day—Shrove Tuesday—by the beginning of the 20th century. There has been some attempt in recent years to change this aspect of the season, such as using Brazilian Carnival parades to focus on national and cultural history. Many churches now observe Mardi Gras with a church pancake breakfast or other church meal, eating together as a community before the symbolic fasting of Lent begins.

SHROVE TUESDAY TRADITIONS

Shrove Tuesday has a variety of customs that have derived from different regions around Europe and the Americas. As previously mentioned, England began the tradition of serving pancakes, and for this reason the day is known as "**Pancake Day**". In addition, there are the annual Pancake Day Races, where contestants dress in aprons and scarves and race down a course flipping a pancake in a frying pan or skillet.

In Eastern Europe, the **Carnival celebrations** include boisterous processions where people in large masks parade around and play jokes on bystanders. The masks are often caricatures of individuals from traditional folklore. Men and women will dress as one another and engage in gendered mimicry. The day is filled with eating, drinking, fortune telling, and practical jokes.

Perhaps the most prominent customs are the balls and pageants in New Orleans and Rio de Janeiro. Like Eastern European celebrations, participants wear masks and costumes, many of which are quite flamboyant and elaborate. Rio has a parade of multi-colored feathers, which include hundreds of dancers dressed in costumes decked with feathers, all dancing the samba. In New Orleans, Mardi Gras includes a variety of parades featuring grand floats and giant effigies of eccentric characters. There is much eating, drinking, and dancing, as well as practical jokes and humorous street plays. The New Orleans and Rio de Janeiro celebrations, public revelry and carousing have become the tradition for Carnival around the world. In some cultures, especially the Portuguese culture of Brazil, the French culture of Louisiana, and some of the Caribbean cultures such as Trinidad, it has tended to take on the excesses of wild and drunken revelry.

In south central Pennsylvania, **Fastnacht Day** is an annual Pennsylvania Dutch celebration that falls on Shrove Tuesday. The word translates to "Fast Night" in English. Fastnachts (pronounced fost-nokts in German) are doughnuts. There are three types of Fastnachts, one made with yeast, one made with baking powder, and one made with potatoes and yeast. All are slightly crispy on the outside and not as sweet as standard doughnuts.

In New Orleans, the dietary staple is **king cake**, a rich concoction of cinnamon roll covered in sugared icing and Mardi Gras-colored sprinkles (purple, green, yellow). In the center of the cake, jarring to those unfamiliar with the tradition, is a baby, which represents the Christ child. The trinket used to be baked into the cake for one lucky feaster to find, but today it is added on top for safety reasons. Sometimes called "kings' cake" or "king's cake," the name derives from the three kings of the Bible and the feast of Epiphany. The Magi arrived in Bethlehem 12 days after Christ's birth - epiphany. Thus, the Twelve Days of Christmas are actually from Christmas Eve to Epiphany. King cake is properly served from Twelfth Night (the day of the Feast of Epiphany) until Mardi Gras, when it must be foregone for Lent.

February 14: Historical Perspective on Ash Wednesday



Ash Wednesday marks the beginning of the Lenten season. Ash Wednesday derives its name from the practice of the pastor lightly rubbing the sign of the cross on the foreheads of worshippers as a sign of their repentance. The ashes used are typically gathered after the Palm Crosses from the previous year's Palm Sunday are burned. In the liturgical practice of some churches, the ashes are mixed with the Oil of the Catechumen (one of the sacred oils used to anoint those about to be baptized), though some churches use ordinary oil. This paste is used by the pastor who presides at the service to make the sign of the cross, first upon his or her own forehead and then on those of congregants.

Ashes were used in ancient times, according to the Bible, to express **mourning**. This **practice** of dusting oneself with ashes to **express sorrow for sins and faults** is mentioned several times in the Bible:

*¹⁹ Tamar **put ashes on her head** and tore the ornate robe she was wearing. She put her hands on her head and went away, weeping aloud as she went. (2 Samuel 13:19)*

Commentary:

King David's son Ammon rapes his sister Tamar and afterwards has his personal servant remove her. By throwing her out, Ammon made it look as if Tamar had made a shameful proposition to him, and there were no witnesses on her behalf because he had gotten rid of the servants. Also his crime destroyed her chances of marriage—because she was no longer a virgin, she could not be given in marriage.

*When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, **put on sackcloth and ashes**, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. ² But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no one clothed in **sackcloth** was allowed to enter it. ³ In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. **Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.** (Esther 4:1-3)*

*So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in **sackcloth and ashes.** (Daniel 9:3)*

Commentary:

Daniel pleaded with God to bring about the promised return of his people to their land. The prophet Jeremiah had written that God would not allow the captives to return to their land for 70 years. Daniel knew of this prophecy and realized that this 70-year period was coming to an end. In Daniel's prayer for the nation he confessed his own sin, using the pronoun "we" throughout. In times of adversity, it is easy to blame others and excuse our own actions. If any Israelite was righteous, it was Daniel; and yet he confessed his sinfulness and need for God's forgiveness. Instead of looking for others to blame, first look inside and confess your own sins to God!

*²¹ "Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in **sackcloth and ashes.** (Matthew 11:21)*

Commentary:

Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom were ancient cities with a long-standing reputation for wickedness. Each was destroyed by God for its evil. The people of Bethsaida, Korazin, and Capernaum saw Jesus firsthand, and yet they stubbornly refused to repent of their sins and believe in him. Jesus said that if some of the wickedest cities in the world had seen him, they would have repented. Because Bethsaida, Korazin, and Capernaum saw Jesus and didn't believe, they would suffer even greater punishment than that of the wicked cities who didn't see Jesus. Similarly, nations and cities with churches on every corner and Bibles in every home will have no excuse on judgment day if they do not repent and believe.

February 15: God's Unconditional Love For Humanity

Doesn't the message of the Gospel tell us that God offers to us,

- Unconditional love – meaning God does not say “I love you, if...”?
- A love that does not depend on what we do or say?—the though salvation and eternal life DOES depend on what we do and say!
- A love that continues even when God is saddened by what we do?
- A love that provided us unmerited grace?
- A patient love that waits for us as a loving parent waits for the return of a lost child?

Don't numerous passages in the Bible affirm God's love for humanity? Indeed, isn't it one of the central themes of the Bible? However, does **God's unconditional love mean His unconditional approval of every human behavior?** Doesn't an honest reading of the Bible clearly tell us that sin separates us from God? So despite His love for humanity, doesn't God's righteousness and justice demand *atonement* to restore humanity's relationship with him? Is this not why God sent Jesus to die on the cross as the perfect, unblemished sacrifice to atone for our sins as numerous passages affirm?

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16-17)

¹⁰ This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:10)

²⁵ God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— (Romans 3:25)

²¹ God made him [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:21)

²⁴ “He [Jesus] himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.” (1 Peter 2:24)

²⁹ The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29)

For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement. (Romans 5:10-11)

In addition, what did Jesus Himself say about his purpose?

And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. (Matthew 26:27-28)

In Luke 5:31-32, Jesus answered, Those who are well have not need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.”

In Mark 1:15, [Jesus said] “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

What does Jesus' call for us to repent imply? Repent from what? Isn't it clear we are called to repent from our sins? Also, what instructions did Jesus give to his twelve disciples when he sent them out to spread the Gospel message? The Apostles "went out and preached that people should repent."

*Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village. ⁷ Calling the Twelve to him, he began to send them out two by two and **gave them authority over impure spirits.***

*⁸ These were his instructions: "Take nothing for the journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in your belts. ⁹ Wear sandals but not an extra shirt. ¹⁰ Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town. ¹¹ And if any place will not welcome you or listen to you, leave that place and shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them." ¹² **They went out and preached that people should repent. (Mark 6:6-12)***

Note that in Jesus' time, shaking the dust from their feet had deep cultural implications. Pious Jews shook the dust from their feet after passing through Gentile cities or territory to show their separation from Gentile influences and practices. The gesture of the disciples shaking the dust from their feet after leaving a Jewish town was vivid sign that they wished to remain separate from people who had rejected Jesus and his message. **Jesus made it clear that the listeners were responsible for what they did with the message of the gospel.** The disciples were not to blame if the message was rejected, as clearly taught in the Jesus' parable of the sower of seeds, as **long as the disciples had faithfully and carefully presented it.**

⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. (Matthew 13:4-8)

Doesn't the parable imply that **as followers and stewards of Christ's message, we are not responsible when others' reject Christ's message of salvation?** The job of the sower (i.e., a disciple of Christ) is to plant the seeds—meaning we do **have the responsibility to clearly, lovingly and faithfully share the gospel message!**

February 16: Both “God of Love” and “God of Justice”

People in today’s culture, both some believers and particularly many non-believers, seem to struggle with the concept of the Christian God being both a *God of love*—offering boundless mercy—and a *God of justice*—demanding justice and atonement for sin. They see the God of the Old Testament, as an angry, wrathful God and the God of the New Testament, as a God of love and mercy. They cannot reconcile how the two images are compatible. But are they incompatible? Or do people fail to understand that the God of the Old Testament is as much a God of mercy as the God of the New Testament? Indeed, wasn’t God preparing and foreshadowing his plan for redemption of humanity in the Old Testament—a plan that was fulfilled in the New Testament by Jesus Christ?

Consider the following passages:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,...” (John 3:16-17)

“... God ... loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:10)

“God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement... (Rom. 3:25)

“God made him [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us...” (2 Cor. 5:21)

“He [Jesus] himself bore our sins ... on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness...” (1 Pet. 2:24)

“... John saw Jesus coming... and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29)

Doesn’t a careful reading of these **passages undeniably show God’s love for the humanity?** Yet don’t they **also undeniably show God’s holiness and justice?** Don’t the passages clearly show how serious God takes sin irrespective of how lightly many in today’s culture view sin? Otherwise, why would God need to send his Son to die as an atonement offering for our sins if sin was not important? Is it a question of whether He is a God of love OR a God of justice? Or, is He a God of BOTH love and justice? Consequently, why do some Christian leaders, truly concerned about faithfully teaching the Gospel message and living lives that offer a credible witness to the Gospel, discuss God’s love without also addressing sin and God’s requirement for atonement? Doesn’t their failure to address the need for atonement actually undermine their credibility as faithful teachers and witnesses to the Gospel message? Doesn’t their decision to avoid the topic of sin in fact represent a lack of true love for their followers by not providing a complete picture of God’s nature? Are they not compromising the message of the Gospel, by adapting the message to the values of the culture, under a misguided belief that they should not challenge the evolving values of today’s culture? What would the Bereans say? What would Jesus say? What should today’s faithful Christians say?

Indeed, **isn’t the reason God is a God of justice is because He is a God of love?** If He were only a just God, He would be neither merciful nor wrathful. A loving and fair God can only *be* a God of justice. To be a God of justice, there must be appropriate punishments for appropriate sinful actions. When a person commits a sin, their fate is already a fact, as the punishment for that sin is already decided. Committing that sin requires that punishment. A God that is strictly just will simply apply the punishment deserved for the sin committed. There will be no mercy, nor wrath, just simply justice. Here’s the crime, here’s the punishment. A God of justice knows that justice has to be served by having the punishment dealt out for the crime. If a God of mercy were to absolve the person of punishment for the sin, then He would no longer *be* a God of justice, for *someone* has to pay the penalty for the sin for justice to be served. Therefore **a just and merciful God, in order to offer mercy to someone, must therefore provide a way for justice to be served.**

Didn’t God decide to offer humanity a way for justice to be served—*“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” [John 3:16] “... as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” [1 John 4:10]*? God offered His only Son to take the punishment for all sins! This was necessary for justice to be served, thereby freeing Him to offer mercy. So when we stand

before the judge (God) and our crimes are listed and the punishment decided upon, then God, out of the goodness and love of His heart, offers us mercy—unmerited grace.

We do not deserve this mercy nor have we earned this mercy by our own efforts; we deserve the punishment that justice demands! However, God has provided that justice will be served in another way—through Christ's atonement—that offers us the mercy. Those who accept His offer of mercy are freed from the punishment of their sins.

God gives us freewill to make our own life choices. However, some people exercise their free will by declining to accept the unmerited gift of grace. They do not want God's gift; they do not accept their punishment as being deserved. They sometimes do not acknowledge that God even has the right to judge them. They believe that they can find their own way to God though Jesus clearly refutes this point of view:

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6)

And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst. (John 6:35)

I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. (John 6:51)

Then spoke Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life. (John 8:12)

I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture. (John 10:9)

I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. (John 10:11)

Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: (John 11:25)

Jesus is the only one who could provide the means for mercy to be bestowed, while justice would still be served. Nobody else except Christ has offered to serve that justice. In fact, **no other religion has offered us a substitution for our punishment**, so that justice and mercy could both exist side by side. That is why Jesus is the way, the truth, the life, and claims "*no one comes to the Father but through me.*" He is the only one who has served justice on our behalf, so that God can offer us mercy.

This is why God is:

- **Just**—He provided that justice is served for all sins. Justice is served not only on a person's sin, but on their rejection of that incredible mercy that is not deserved at the same time.
- **Loving**—He loves us so much that He gave His only Son to be our substitute when He did not deserve our punishment.
- **Merciful**—He offers that gift of mercy freely to anyone who wants it regardless of how bad their sins may be.

February 17: Personal Reflection By Connie Morrill-Hair

Theme: Ready to meet Jesus

No matter how old we are, we can learn something by sharing time with others. I find joy and learn a lot by sharing time with people in a different phase of life.

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11: 28, NIV)

I have been involved with folks who could use a friendly visit since I was in my late 30's. Actually, this started when my employer introduced me to volunteering at a nursing facility as part of our commitment to give back to the community.

My first encounter was with Betty, who did not interact with others very often and spent most of her days alone in her room. Betty reminded me of my beloved grandmother and we became friends. We shared pictures, she told me about her life, and we soon were making rounds outside as I pushed her wheelchair—something the facility was so surprised to witness and gave me more satisfaction than I could have imagined.

When Betty went to be with the Lord, I became friends with Estelle, Betty's only friend in the facility. Estelle loved telling me stories and helped me to value many things I had previously taken for granted. This sharing time with folks has continued in different ways, but continued none the less.

Since I have been at St. John's I have continued to enjoy meeting folks I don't know but can use a friendly visit. I continue to learn something from each person including trials of life, personality characteristics that help as we age, and how important faith really is.

Most recently one of my 'friends' has faced a health crisis, and even now his future on earth is uncertain. And yet, he continues to try to smile, to tell me he loves me, and how blessed he is.

Not a wealthy man, not a man of higher education, not a man focused on material goods, but a loving caring man who loves the Lord and says he is ready to meet Jesus. I know our earthly friendship will soon end, but I rejoice in knowing he will be with Jesus and he will find rest. I hope I can be like him when my life on earth draws to an end—feeling blessed and ready to meet Jesus.

Prayer: Dear God: Thank you for all the opportunities we have to meet and share time with people who need a friend. May we never grow tired of reaching out to others, of learning something from them, of feeling blessed, and of doing what we can to get ready to meet Jesus! Amen.

February 18: The Gospel Message of “Good News”

Have you ever reflected on why the Gospel message is referred to as the “Good News”? Consider several explanations:

- The Gospel is Good News in that God loves the world enough to give His only Son to die for our sin.

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. (John 3:16-18)

- The Gospel is Good News because our salvation and eternal life and home in heaven are guaranteed through Christ.

Jesus Comforts His Disciples. *“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. ² My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going.” (John 14:1-4)*

Praise to God for a Living Hope. *³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:3-4)*

- The Gospel is Good News when we understand that we cannot earn our salvation; the work of redemption and justification is complete, having been finished on the cross. Jesus is the propitiation for our sins.

The Death of Jesus. *²⁸ Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, “I am thirsty.” ²⁹ A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. ³⁰ When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (John 19:30)*

But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ² He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:2)

- The Gospel is Good News in that we, who were once enemies of God, have been reconciled by the blood of Christ and adopted into the family of God.

¹⁰ For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! (Romans 5:10)

¹⁰ He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. ¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:12)

See what **great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!** And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ² Dear friends, **now we are children of God**, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. ³ All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. **(1 John 3:1)**

- The Gospel is Good News in that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus".

Therefore, **there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus**, ² because **through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death**. ³ For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, **God did by sending his own Son** in the likeness of sinful flesh **to be a sin offering**. And so **he condemned sin in the flesh**, ⁴ **in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us**, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵ Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. **(Romans 8:1)**

Note that Jesus Himself declared that He came to "fulfill the law", thus affirming that the righteous requirement of the law had to be fully met.

The Fulfillment of the Law. ¹⁷ "Do not think that I have come to abolish **the Law** or the Prophets; **I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them**. ¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. **(Matthew 5:16-18)**

After reflecting on the several reasons why the Gospel is "Good News", consider what is the primary focus of the Gospel? Is it about how to be healed? Is it about being a servant? Or is it **primarily** about salvation and eternal life?

²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to **give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins**." **(Matthew 1:21)**

²⁹ The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, **what must I do to be saved?**" ³¹ They replied, "**Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved**—you and your household." ³² Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. **(Acts 16:31)**

¹⁵ That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome. ¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of **the gospel**, because **it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes**: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. ¹⁷ For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." **(Romans 1:16)**

Isn't it true that a believer who never got healed from a disease can still go to Heaven while anyone not saved from sin cannot go? (e.g., Lazarus ridden with poverty and disease went to Heaven!).

Isn't it true that an unbeliever is capability of living a moral life yet still will not go to Heaven if unsaved?

Isn't it true that an unbeliever is capability of living a life of servanthood yet still will not go to Heaven if unsaved?

²⁷ Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but **only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life**. **(Revelation 21:27)**

Doesn't life of Jesus Christ personify the Gospel message of God?

Jesus the Way to the Father. ⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. ⁷If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him." (John 14:6)

Is there any blessing apart from Jesus Christ?

Praise for Spiritual Blessings in Christ. ³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. (Ephesians 1:3)

Note that even the Holy Spirit does not add anything to what Christ has "finished" for us. As the Spirit of Truth the Holy Spirit will lead us more and more towards Christ the Truth. He will take of what is Christ's and declare it to us. Failure to understand this may lead people into accepting "another" gospel!

¹³ But when he, the **Spirit of truth**, comes, **he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears**, and he will tell you what is yet to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me because it is **from me that he will receive what he will make known to you.** ¹⁵ All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you." (John 16:13-15)

Doesn't rejection of the Gospel message lead to embracing the *bad news*, the condemnation before God, which comes from the lack of **faith in the Jesus Christ—God's only provision for salvation.**

Jesus the Way to the Father. ⁵ Thomas said to him, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" ⁶ Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. ¹¹ Jesus is "the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone." ¹² Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. (John 3:16-18)

³⁶ Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them. (John 3:36)

³ This is good, and pleases God our Savior, ⁴ who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. ⁵ For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, (1 Timothy 2:3-5)

⁶ But the righteousness that is by faith says: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷ "or 'Who will descend into the deep?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸ But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: ⁹ If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

February 19: Communicating the Gospel Message

The Church has survived, even flourished, during its 2000-year history of cultural change. Many times it was the church itself that helped to effect change, which is as it should be. But there were also many times where the church itself was being changed. The question of asking whether evangelicalism will survive is misguided. **The Gospel message will always survive! The problem lies with the method of communicating, not with the message.** Perhaps we need to focus on how it is being communicated?

Many today debate about how we should “do church”. The approach to evangelicalism which we inherited from our spiritual forefathers operated a certain way because of where and when it was active. Didn’t the **evangelicalism of 100 years ago assume a familiarity with the Scriptures, even by non-believers, which provided a common understanding between those in the church and those outside of it? But does such a common understanding exist today—even within the church?** Hasn’t the Bible become a bookshelf ornament for many people—whether church or unchurch? In addition, the Bible is no longer even taught as literature, so any sort of knowledge of its contents cannot be taken for granted. Isn’t illiteracy regarding the scripture one of the primary reasons that evangelicalism is currently struggling to find a place in today’s culture and why unsound doctrine seems to be gaining a foothold within today’s church?

Isn’t it ironic that the very institution—the church—that holds the answers to many of society’s ills seems to be struggling? **In a culture where the idea of absolute truth has been abandoned** as a relic from the modernistic past—the church stands by wondering how to communicate with the culture on its own terms. Absolute truth cannot be watered down into relative terms. Living water can only quench those who know they are thirsty. **The methods and ideas which have come to characterize evangelicalism in the last 20-30 years have been successful in filling up big buildings with lots of people on Sunday mornings. But have they truly succeeded in the Great Commission task of making disciples? Have the lives of the pew-fillers truly been transformed? Doesn’t the church need to stay focused on its message of absolute and sovereign truth, and not allow numbers to dictate what its methods should be?** *“A society that cultivates commonness, that has more esteem for the entrepreneur who caters to the tastes of the many than the visionary who challenges the spirits of the few—such a society is always in danger of defining worth in terms of immediate demand rather than eternal significance.”* [Myers, *All God’s Children*, pp. 22-23.] Remember it took only two—Paul and Silas—to be accused of “turning the whole world upside down” with their preaching and teaching of the Gospel [Acts 17:1-9]. **Are numbers and methods what matters most or is obedience to the message of the Gospel what really counts?**

Change is a natural part of life, as well as the church. **But as the church adapts to changes in our culture, are we merely changing the mechanisms for communicating the gospel message or are we changing the substance of the Gospel message to accommodate and conform to our culture?** The Bible tells us that the church is the body of Christ. [1 Corinthians 12]. When we speak of the universal church, we are speaking of an “organism” that includes all the redeemed—both living and dead—throughout the church age. But the church does not function as one monolithic organism—it functions through many small local congregations and denominations. **What guidance does the Bible offer about the function of the local church?** In *The Great Commission*, Jesus instructed His followers **to evangelize**—to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...” He also instructed His followers **to teach** them **to obey everything I have commanded you.**

The Great Commission

¹⁶ Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” [Mathew 20: 16-20].

In Timothy, the mission of the church is described as being the pillar and support of the truth. It is the **ONE PLACE WHERE TRUTH IS BELIEVED, UPHELD AND PROCLAIMED!**

*¹⁵ if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the **church** of the living God, the **pillar and foundation of the truth**. (1 Timothy 3:15)*

In Acts, we see some specific instruction given by Peter to the local assemblies (i.e., congregation) of people.

*³⁶ "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah." ³⁷ When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" ³⁸ Peter replied, "**Repent and be baptized**, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹ The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." ⁴⁰ With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." ⁴¹ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. ⁴² They **devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship**, to the **breaking of bread** and to **prayer**. (Acts 2:36-42)*

Of the functions mentioned, **evangelism is the one biblically mandated function in which believers are to engage outside of the assembled congregation**. It seems that the early church worship service was not designed and targeted for **unbelievers but for the believers!** So when the local congregation came together, it spent the bulk of its time focused on the apostle's teaching **so that believers could grow in their knowledge** and experience. They **believed it was vital that believers be trained in the Word to move toward a mature faith**.

*¹¹ We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. ¹² In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! ¹³ **Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.** ¹⁴ **But solid food is for the mature**, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. (Hebrews 5:11-14)*

However as members of the congregation we are also told to always be prepared to make a defense of our faith to anyone who asks us to give an account for our hope.

*¹⁵ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. **Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have**. But do this with gentleness and respect,... (1 Peter 3:15).*

From the above scriptures, it seems the essential functions of the local congregation are to 1) evangelize, 2) study the Word, 3) fellowship with one another, 4) take sacraments, and 5) pray. These activities help distinguish it from a social club. **If these were the primary functions important to the early church, should they also be a priority for us today?**

Spiritual Nugget #2

Isn't the Gospel a universal message for both Jews and Gentiles both?

Isn't the Gospel a bold message that as believers, we should not be ashamed of proclaiming it?

Isn't the Gospel a saving message that is the only thing that can truly reform the human heart?

Isn't the Gospel an unmerited, awesome gift that offers us salvation through faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ?

February 20: A Personal Reflection By Jerry Thomason

Theme: Types of Prayers

There are four basic types of prayer, though I have seen a list of up to twenty:

- Prayer of **Blessing and Adoration** (praising God)
- Prayer of **Petition** (asking for what we need, including forgiveness)
- Prayer of **Intercession** (asking for what others need)
- Prayer of **Thanksgiving** (for what God has given and done)

When I think of prayers praising God, I think of the wonderful music we sing in church such as “praise God from whom all blessings flow”. My personal prayer time usually lacks this important understanding of how great is our God. This is something I plan to work on during this Lenten season. And since it is not something I’m used to doing, it will take a conscious effort to change that pattern/habit.

Identifying and asking for what we need would seem to be the easiest of them all. Yes, asking for forgiveness is part of the Lord’s Prayer and a must. But, my definition of asking for what I need rarely includes the caveat that it’s God’s will, not mine that needs to be asked for. It’s so easy to “know” I need this or that to make my life easier or better. Once during an evening Lenten service here at St. John’s I remember an exercise that included walking up front and taking a 3 x 5 card with a word that we identify as a need in our lives. I went directly to the pile of cards that said “PATIENCE”. It turned out that there were no “patience” cards left and I took a different one (I’m sure I needed that too). But it does take some thinking and reflection to really identify what we need.

My evening prayers always start with asking for what others need. To be specific, they always start by asking God to comfort family members and friends who I know really need it. Sometimes I think about what’s going on in the world and ask God to comfort those who are affected by war but wonder how they can feel comforted. In fact, even those close friends and family members may be hard pressed to be comforted after the loss of a loved one or news of terrible illness. I may not know how, when, or if these people can be comforted, but I persistently pray for it anyway.

There are so many things to be thankful for. During one of our Sunday Adult Study Classes, a participant talked about being thankful for coffee (and I seconded that notion). But then she went on to talk about all the things that had to take place in order to have that hot cup of java on the table in front of her. When we think about it, the bean farmer, pickers, truck drivers, packagers, brewers, cup makers, etc. all play a part of having that simple pleasure. My evening prayers always include being thankful for my friends and family (even Facebook friends). And it is so easy to reflect on and appreciate the gift of our church family here at St. John’s and how it makes up such an important part of our lives. At the end of my evening prayer, I always thank God for LIFE, for LOVE, and for LYNDIA (my wife). That seems to make my day complete.

February 21: Message of Hope, Part 1

Don't some Christians seem to believe that faith is a personal matter that should be kept to oneself? And doesn't it appear that many in today's secular culture have a similar view and in fact would prefer believers keep their views on faith to themselves? But don't Christians have an obligation to share their faith as ambassadors of Christ's message.

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. (2 Corinthians 5:20)

Are not Christians expected to know and share the basis for their hope? In fact **doesn't the Scripture explicitly tell believers to know and share the Gospel message of hope?**

- Didn't Jesus tell his follower to "make disciples of all nations" in the Great Commission?

¹⁶ Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."
(Matthew 28-16-20)

- Didn't the Apostle Paul instruct believers to "always be prepared to give ... the reason for the hope that we have"? Believers are to be prepared to make a defense to any unbeliever who asks why they believe what they believe, and they are to share that belief in gentleness and respect.

¹⁵ But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. (1 Peter 3:15-16)

CONTRASTING HOPE AND FAITH.

Before exploring the core reason for a believer's hope, perhaps it would be helpful to contrast the concepts of "hope" and "faith"?

Isn't the concept of hope in today's culture more like a desire, a wish? For example someone might say, "I hope that it doesn't rain tomorrow". However, isn't **Biblical hope like an anchor, or a firm solid foundation that we stand on?** Christ is our eternal Hope, a sure foundation, our "Cornerstone", "Rock" and "Fortress". Isn't Biblical hope built on something solid, not a wishy-washy desire that would make our life easier or better?

In contract, isn't **Faith the spiritual element** that moves us forward? James says that "faith without works is dead".

...faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. ¹⁸ But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. ¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. ²⁰ You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? ²¹ Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. ²³ And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. ²⁴ You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone. (James 2:17-24)

If we have faith for something, than we plan and make provision for it. The **faith that we have in Christ is built upon a sure, solid foundation of hope in Christ, His finished work on the cross and His resurrecting power.**

If we liken our Christian experience to building a house, then hope would be the foundation, the footings to hold the house firmly in place. Faith would be building the structure, the edifice, remembering that the larger and taller the building, the deeper and stronger the foundation must be. Love is what fills the house, and brings life to the inhabitants. This is why love is the greatest. You can have a great foundation, and a large grand building, but if the inner workings does not have love and life, it's just an empty building, waiting to deteriorate and fall.

THE BIBLICAL DEFINITION OF HOPE.

Next, before exploring the core reasons for a believer's hope, perhaps it would be helpful to reflect on what is meant by *Biblical Hope* verses a secularist's concept of hope that typically understands hope as wishful thinking (e.g., "I hope something will happen!)." Yet, this is not what the Bible means by hope.

The biblical definition of **hope** is "**confident expectation.**"

- Hope is a firm assurance regarding things that are unclear and unknown.

*²⁴ For in this hope **we were saved**. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. (Romans 8:24-25)*

Faith in Action. Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

² This is what the ancients were commended for.

³ By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

⁴ By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.

⁵ By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: "He could not be found, because God had taken him away." For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God.

⁶ And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.

⁷ By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith (Hebrews 11:1-7)

- Isn't hope a fundamental component of the life of the believer?

There is surely a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off. (Proverbs 23:18)

- Without hope, doesn't life lose its meaning?

So I say, "My splendor is gone and all that I had hoped from the LORD." (Lamentations 3:18)

*"My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle, and they **come to an end without hope.***

⁷ Remember, O God, that my life is but a breath; my eyes will never see happiness again. (Job 7:6)

- In addition, in death there is no hope.

*Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish. In your love you kept me from the pit of destruction; you have put all my sins behind your back. ¹⁸ For the grave cannot praise you, death cannot sing your praise; **those who go down to the pit cannot hope for your faithfulness.** (Isaiah 38:18)*

¹³ If the only home I hope for is the grave, if I spread out my bed in the realm of darkness, ¹⁴ if I say to corruption, 'You are my father,' and to the worm, 'My mother' or 'My sister,' ¹⁵ where then is my hope— who can see any hope for me? (Job 17:15)

- However, the righteous who trust and put their hope in God,

- Will be helped.

*The LORD is my strength and my shield; **my heart trusts in him, and he helps me.** My heart leaps for joy, and with my song I praise him. (Psalm 28:7)*

- Will have a general confidence in God's protection and help.

¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. (Jeremiah 29:11)

- Will be free from fear and anxiety.

*Therefore **we will not fear**, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, (Psalm 46:2)*

Spiritual Nugget #3

Grace is when God gives us good things that we don't deserve.

Mercy is when God spares us from bad things we do deserve.

Blessings are when God is generous with both.

February 22: Hope, Part 2—The New Testament View

The New Testament concept of hope is recognition that in Christ is found the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises.

*A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory. ²¹ **In his name the nations will put their hope.**” (Matthew 12:21)*

*³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! **In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,** ⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. **This inheritance is kept in heaven for you,** ⁵ **who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.** (1 Peter 1:3)*

The blessed future of Christian hope is:

- **Rooted in faith** in the divine salvation in Christ. Trying to be saved by keeping the Law and being saved by grace are two entirely different approaches. In fact, attempting to obey the law does not make it any easier for God to save us. All we can do is accept His gracious gift through faith. Our deeds of service should reflect our gratitude and transformed hearts—not means to earn salvation! Salvation is a choice, not a chore! Love for God and others is the response of those whom God has forgiven. Indeed, doesn’t faith express itself through love?

*⁵ For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. **The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.** (Galatians 5:5)*

Note that circumcision was a symbol of having the right background and doing everything required by religion. But no amount of work, discipline, or moral behavior can save us. In fact, doesn’t trying to save ourselves by keeping all God’s laws actually separate us from God? Doesn’t the Scripture unmistakably teach that we are saved by faith—not by deeds?

- Brought into being through the presence of the **promised Holy Spirit**. Believers are given the “*firstfruits*”—the first installment or down payment of the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of our resurrection life.

*²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. ²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, **who have the firstfruits of the Spirit**, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the **redemption of our bodies.** ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. (Romans 8:24-25)*

Note that Paul presents the idea that salvation is past, present and future. It is past because we were saved the moment we believed in Jesus Christ as Savior; our new life (eternal life) begins at the moment. It is present because we are being saved; this is the process of sanctification. But we have not yet fully received all the benefits and blessings of salvation that will be ours when Christ’s new kingdom is completely established. That is our future salvation. We can look ahead with hope toward the complete change of body and personality that lies beyond this life.

- The **future “hope of the resurrection of the dead.”** The Sadducees and Pharisees were two groups of religious leaders with different beliefs. The Pharisees believed in a bodily resurrection, but the Sadducees did not because they adhered only to Genesis through Deuteronomy which did not contain any teaching on resurrection. Paul’s words shifted the debate away from himself and toward the issue of resurrection.

*⁶ Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, “My brothers, I am a Pharisee, descended from Pharisees. **I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead.**” ⁷ When he said this, a dispute broke out between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided. ⁸ (The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits, but the Pharisees believe all these things.) (Acts 23:6)*

- The **promises given to Israel**.

⁶ And now it is **because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors** that I am on trial today.

⁷ This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. King Agrippa, it is because of this hope that these Jews are accusing me. **(Acts 26:6-7)**

- The **redemption of a believer's body** and of the whole creation. Believers will be resurrected with glorified bodies like the body of Christ now has in heaven.

²³ Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the **redemption of our bodies**. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. **(Romans 8:23-25)**

- **Eternal glory**. False teachers in the Colossian church believed that spiritual perfection was a secret and hidden plan that only a few privileged people could discover. Their secret plan was meant to be exclusive. Paul said that he was proclaiming the Word of God in its fullness—not just a part of the plan. He also called God's plan a "*the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations*"—not in the sense that only a few would understand, but because it was hidden until the time of Jesus Christ. However, through Christ, the plan was made open to all. God's secret plan is "*Christ in you, the hope of glory*"—God planned to have His Son, Jesus Christ, live in the hearts of all who believe in Him.

²⁵ I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness— ²⁶ **the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations**, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. ²⁷ To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is **Christ in you, the hope of glory**. **(Colossians 1:27)**

- **Eternal life** and the inheritance of the saints.

⁴ But when the kindness and love of **God our Savior** appeared, ⁵ **he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy**. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by **the Holy Spirit**, ⁶ whom he poured out on us generously through **Jesus Christ our Savior**, ⁷ so that, having been justified by his grace, **we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life**. **(Titus 3:5-7)**

Note that Paul summarizes what Christ does for us when He saves us. We move from a life full of sin to one where we are led by God's Holy Spirit. All our sins, not merely some, are washed away. Washing refers to the water of baptism, which is external sign of salvation. In becoming a Christian, the believer acknowledges Christ as Lord and recognizes Christ's saving work. We gain eternal life. We have renewal by the Holy Spirit. None of this occurs because we earned or deserved it; it is all a gift from God.

Also note that all three persons of the Trinity are mentioned in these verses because all three participate in the work of salvation. Based on the redemptive work of His Son, the Father forgives and sends the Holy Spirit to wash away our sins and continually renew us.

- The **return of Jesus Christ**. The power to live as a Christian comes from the Holy Spirit. Because Christ died and rescued us from sin, we are free from sin's control. God gives us the power and understanding to live according to His will and do good. Then we will look forward to Christ's return with hope.

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. ¹² It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, ¹³ **while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ**, ¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. **(Titus 2:11-14)**

- **Transformation of believers** into the likeness of Christ. The Christian life is a process of becoming more and more like Christ. This process will not be complete until we see Christ face to face. But knowing that is our ultimate destiny should help motivate us to purify ourselves. To purify means to keep morally straight and free from the corruption of sin.

*²Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, **we shall be like him**, for we shall see him as he is. ³All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. (1 John 3:2-3)*

Note that there is a difference between committing a sin and continuing to sin. Even the most faithful believers sometimes commit sins, but they do not cherish a particular sin and choose to commit it. A believer who commits sin repents, confesses, and finds forgiveness. In contrast, a person who continues to sin is not sorry for what he or she is doing. This person never confesses and never receives forgiveness. Such a person is in opposition to God, not matter what religious claims he or she makes.

- The salvation of God or simply **Christ Himself**. While Jesus Christ offered salvation for all people, His offer of salvation only becomes effective for those who accept Him as their savior!

*⁸For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. ⁹This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. ¹⁰That is why we labor and strive, because we **have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe.** (1 Timothy 4:10)*

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and **of Christ Jesus our hope**,*

²To Timothy my true son in the faith: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. (1 Timothy 1:1)

Consider that in today's culture, doesn't it seem that more emphasis is placed on physical health than spiritual health. But while our physical health is susceptible to disease and injury, faith can help sustain us through such tragedies. To train ourselves to be "godly" don't we need to develop our faith by using our God-given capabilities in the service of the church?

But how is the certainty of this blessed future guaranteed? Isn't it through the following?

- The indwelling of the Spirit.

*²³Not only so, but we ourselves, **who have the firstfruits of the Spirit**, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. (Romans 8:23-25)*

- Christ in us.

*²⁵I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness— ²⁶the **mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations**, but is now disclosed to the Lord's people. ²⁷To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is **Christ in you, the hope of glory.** ²⁸He is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. (Colossians 1:27)*

- The resurrection of Christ.

*²⁴**But God raised him from the dead**, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. ²⁵David said about him: "I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. ²⁶Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; **my body also***

*will rest in hope,*²⁷ because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead, you will not let your holy one see decay. (Acts 2:26)

Isn't hope produced by endurance through suffering?

*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we **now stand**. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.³ Not only so, but **we also glory in our sufferings**, because we know that **suffering produces perseverance**;⁴ **perseverance, character; and character, hope**.⁵ And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. (Romans 5:2-5)*

Note that the Apostle Paul states that, as believers, we stand in a place of highest privilege—"this grace in which we now stand". Not only has God declared us not guilty, through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, but he has drawn us closer to Himself. Instead of being enemies, we have become His friend—in fact, His own children (Galatians 4:5).

Spiritual Nugget #4

*Jesus saved us,
not because of righteous things we had done,
but because of his mercy.*

February 23: Hope, Part 3—The New Testament View *continued...*

Our relationship with God begins with **faith**, which helps us realize that we are delivered from our past by Christ's death. **Hope** grows as we learn all that God has in mind for us; it gives us the promise of the future. God's **love** fills our lives and gives us the ability to reach out to others.

Isn't hope also the inspiration behind endurance?

² *We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers.* ³ *We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your **endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.** (1 Thessalonians 2:3)*

¹⁰ *God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.* ¹¹ *We want each of you to **show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized.*** ¹² *We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised. (Hebrews 6:11)*

Those who hope in Christ will see Christ exalted in life and in death. In fact, don't' trustworthy promises from God give us hope?

²⁰ *I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always **Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.** (Philippians 1:20)*

¹⁸ *God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which **it is impossible for God to lie**, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged.* ¹⁹ ***We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure...** (Hebrews 6:18-19)*

We may boast in this hope, as well as exhibit great boldness in our faith.

⁶ *But Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory. (Hebrews 3:6)*

¹² *Therefore, **since we have such a hope, we are very bold.** (2 Corinthians 3:12)*

By contrast, those who do not place their trust in God are said to be without hope.

¹⁰ *For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* ¹¹ *Therefore, **remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (which is done in the body by human hands)—*** ¹² ***remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.** (Ephesians 2:12)*

Believers Who Have Died. ¹³ *Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like **the rest of mankind, who have no hope.*** ¹⁴ *For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.* ¹⁵ *According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. (1 Thessalonians 4:13)*

Along with faith and love, hope is an enduring virtue of the Christian life.

¹³ *And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:13)*

³ *We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you,* ⁴ *because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people—* ⁵ ***the faith and love that spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven and about which you have already heard in the true message of the gospel** (Colossians 1:4-5)*

¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² **Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.** (Romans 12:12)

¹³ May the God of **hope fill you with all joy and peace** as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)

Note that in morally corrupt Corinth, love had a mixed-up term with little meaning. In today's people aren't many people still confused about the meaning of love? Love is the greatest of all human qualities, and it is also an attribute of God (1 John 4:8). Christian love involves unselfish service to others; to show it gives evidence that you care.

While **faith** is the foundation & content of the God's message, **hope** is the attitude & focus and **love** is the action!

When faith and hope are aligned, we are free to love completely because you then understand how God loves.

In fact, love springs from hope which produces joy and peace in believers through the power of the Spirit. Note that in his letter to the Colossians, the Apostle Paul addresses a heresy similar to Gnosticism. Gnostics believed that it took special knowledge to be accepted by God—even for those who claimed to be Christians. For them, Christ alone was not the way of salvation. Therefore, Paul commended the Colossians for their faith, love and hope—three main emphases of Christianity. He deliberately omitted the word *knowledge* because of the special knowledge aspect associated with the heresy. It is not what we know that brings salvation, but who we know!

While Jesus and the Father are not the same person, they are one in essence and nature. Jesus is not simply a good teacher—He is the God. Consequently, **knowing Christ is knowing God!!!**

⁷ **If you really know me, you will know my Father as well.** From now on, you do know him and have seen him.” (John 14:7)

²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. ³⁰ **I and the Father are one.**” (John 10:30)

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as **Christ Jesus:** ⁶ **Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;** ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. (Philippians 2:5-7)

⁹ **For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,** (Colossians 2:9)

Hope in the return of Christ is the basis for believers to purify themselves in this life. In addition, doesn't the power of the Holy Spirit help believers to live self-controlled, godly lives? Doesn't the Holy Spirit give us understanding to live according to God's will and to do good?

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. ¹² It **teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions,** and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, ¹³ **while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ,** ¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. (Titus 2:11-14)

³ All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. (1 John 3:3)

Also, didn't the Apostle Paul attribute his apostolic calling to the hope of eternal glory?

Paul, a **servant** of God and **an apostle of Jesus Christ** to further the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth that leads to godliness— ² **in the hope of eternal life, which God, who does not lie, promised** before the beginning of time, (Titus 1:1-2)

February 24: Hope, Part 4—Reasons For a Believer’s Hope

So what is the core reason for the hope of believers? Is it not the message of the Gospel? But what is the core Gospel message? The word *gospel* literally means "good news."

¹⁰ *But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. (Luke 2:10)*

The phrase occurs 93 times in the Bible, exclusively in the New Testament. In Greek, it is the word *euaggelion*, from which we get our English words *evangelist*, *evangel*, and *evangelical*. The gospel is, broadly speaking, the whole of Scripture. But more narrowly, the gospel is the good news concerning Jesus Christ and the gift of salvation that he offers those who choose to accept His gift.

Isn't the key to understanding the meaning of the word *gospel* to understand why it is good news? To do that, perhaps it would help to first understand what is the "bad news"? The Old Testament Law was given to Israel during the time of Moses.

The Ten Commandments. *Moses summoned all Israel and said: Hear, Israel, the decrees and laws I declare in your hearing today. Learn them and be sure to follow them. (Deuteronomy 5:1)*

The Law can be thought of as a measuring stick, and sin is anything that falls short of "perfect" according to that standard. The righteous requirement of the Law is so stringent that no human being could possibly follow it perfectly, in letter or in spirit. Despite our "goodness" or "badness" relative to each other, we are all in the same spiritual boat—we have sinned, and the punishment for sin is death, i.e. separation from God, the source of life.

²⁰ *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. ²¹ But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. (Romans 3:23).*

Therefore, in order for us to go to heaven, God's dwelling place and the realm of life and light, sin must be somehow removed or paid for. The Law established the fact that cleansing from sin can only happen through the bloody sacrifice of an innocent life.

²² *In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. (Hebrews 9:22)*

The Gospel involves Jesus' death on the cross as the sin offering to fulfill the Law's righteous requirement.

³ *For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Romans 8:3-4)*

⁵ *Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; ⁶ with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. ⁷ Then I said, 'Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, my God.'" ⁸ First he said, "Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them"—though they were offered in accordance with the law. ⁹ Then he said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." He sets aside the first to establish the second. ¹⁰ And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (Hebrews 10:5-10)*

Under the Law, animal sacrifices were offered year after year as a reminder of sin and a symbol of the coming sacrifice of Christ.

¹¹ Day after day every **priest** stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he **offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.** ¹² But when this priest [Jesus Christ] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. ¹⁴ For **by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.** ¹⁵ The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: ¹⁶ "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds." ¹⁷ Then he adds: **"Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more."** ¹⁸ **And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.** (Hebrews 10:11-18)

When Christ offered Himself at Calvary, that symbol became a reality for all who would believe. **The work of atonement was finished by Jesus Christ. And that's good news!!!**

The *Gospel* also involves Jesus' resurrection on the third day.

²⁵ He was delivered over to death for our sins and was **raised to life for our justification.** (Romans 4:25)

The word *justification* represents God's act of declaring believers—those have accepted Christ as their savior—"not guilty" for their sins. When we believe, an exchange takes place. We give Christ our sins, and He gives us His righteousness and forgiveness. There is nothing we can do to earn God's justification. Only through Christ can we receive God's righteousness. What a bargain! Yet sadly, many still choose to pass up this gift to continue enjoying their sin or accept the views advocated by many in today's culture that there are many paths to God. The fact **that Jesus conquered sin and death (sin's penalty) is good news! The fact that He offers to share that victory with us is the greatest news of all!!!**

[Jesus speaking to His disciples...] ¹⁹ Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. **Because I live, you also will live.** ²⁰ On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. (John 14:19)

The elements of the Gospel message are eloquently stated in 1 Corinthians 15. Don't the following verses offer the Gospel message in its purest and fullest form?

The Resurrection of Christ. *Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.* ² *By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.* ³ *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: **that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,** ⁴ **that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,** ⁵ and **that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.** ⁶ *After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.* (1 Corinthians 15:1-6)*

Consider the following points:

1. Paul "received" the gospel and then "passed [it] on". The Gospel is a *divine* message, not a man-made invention.
2. The Gospel message is "*of first importance.*" Everywhere the Apostles went, they preached the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ.
3. The message of the gospel is accompanied by proofs: Christ died for our sins (proved by His burial), and He rose again the third day (proved by the eyewitnesses).
4. All this was done "*according to the Scriptures*"; the theme of the whole Bible is the salvation of mankind through Christ. The Bible is the gospel.

February 25: Hope, Part 5—Peace of Mind

Most people would probably define “peace of mind” as the absence of mental stress and anxiety. The expression “peace of mind” typically conjures up images of Buddha-like composure wherein calm, comfort, and composure are so prevalent that nothing can disturb the one who has peace of mind. An imperturbable, placid person is said to have peace of mind. The only time “*peace of mind*” is found in the Bible is the NIV translation of 2 Corinthians where Paul says he found no “peace of mind” because he didn't find Titus in Troas. The literal translation of this phrase is “*rest of my spirit*.”

*¹³ I still had no **peace of mind**, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia. (2 Corinthians 2:13)*

The Bible uses the word *peace* in several different ways:

- *Peace* sometimes refers to a **state of friendship between God and man**. This peace between a holy God and sinful mankind has been effected by Christ's sacrificial death, “*having made peace through the blood of his cross*.”

*¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by **making peace through his blood, shed on the cross**. (Colossians 1:20)*

In addition, as High Priest the Jesus maintains that state of friendship on behalf of all who continue to “*come to God by him, seeing he always lives to make intercession for them*.”

*²⁵ Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because **he always lives to intercede for them**. (Hebrews 7:25)*

- This state of friendship with God is a prerequisite for the second kind of peace, that which sometimes refers to a **tranquil mind**. It is only when “*we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*.” that we can experience the true peace of mind that is a “*fruit of the Spirit*.” In other words, His fruit exhibited in us.

*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, **we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ**, ² through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. (Romans 5:1)*

*²² But the **fruit of the Spirit** is *love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control*. (Galatians 5:22)*

Isaiah tells us that God will keep us in “*perfect peace*” if our minds are “*steadfast*” on Him, meaning our minds lean on Him, center on Him, and trust in Him.

*You will keep in **perfect peace** those whose **minds are steadfast**, because they trust in you. (Isaiah 26:3)*

Our tranquility of mind is “perfect” or imperfect to the degree that the “*minds are steadfast*” on God rather than ourselves or on our problems. Peace is experienced as we believe what the Bible says about God's nearness, and about His goodness and power, His mercy and love for His children, and His complete sovereignty over all of life's circumstances.

You have searched me, LORD, and you know me.

² You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.

³ You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.

⁴ Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely.

⁵ You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me.

⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.

⁷ Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

⁹ If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.
¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,"
¹² even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.
(Psalm 139:1-12)

But how can we trust someone we don't know? Therefore, is it not crucial to come to know intimately the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ?

Does not prayer help achieve a peaceful mind?

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, **by prayer and petition**, with thanksgiving, **present your requests to God**. ⁷ And **the peace of God**, which transcends all understanding, **will guard your hearts and your minds** in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:6-7)

Are not a peaceful mind and heart achieved by recognizing that an all-wise and loving Father has a purpose in our trials?

²⁸ And we know that **in all things God works for the good of those who love him**, who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

Do not the Scriptures teach that God can bring a variety of good things, including peace, from the afflictions that we experience? Won't even the discipline and chastening of the Lord *yield the peaceable fruit of righteousness* in our lives?

¹¹ No **discipline** seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it **produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it**. (Hebrews 12:11)

In addition, don't discipline and chastening,

- Provide a fresh opportunity for "hoping in God" and eventually "praising Him?"

*Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? **Put your hope in God**, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.* (Psalm 43:5)

- Help us "comfort" others when they undergo similar trials?

³ Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the **God** of all comfort, ⁴ **who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble** with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. (2 Corinthians 1:4)

- "Achieve for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all?"

¹⁷ For our light and momentary troubles are **achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all**. (2 Corinthians 4:17)

Peace of mind and the tranquility of spirit that accompanies it are only available when we have true peace with God through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross in payment of our sins. Those who attempt to find peace in worldly pursuits will find themselves sadly deceived. For Christians, however, peace of mind is available through the intimate knowledge of, and complete trust in, the God who meets "all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus."

¹⁹ And my **God will meet all your needs** according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:19)

February 26: A Personal Reflection By Bob Macfarlane

Theme: "You Can Do All Things!"

On one of the walls of our home hangs a beautifully etched saying – one of my very favorite biblical phrases:

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13)

Through both good times and tough times, these words from St. Paul give hope when there seems to be no way out, they give courage when we've lost our nerve, and they give light when all about us seems dark and dreary. Paul wrote those words from his Roman prison, when hope and courage and light seemed so distant to the casual observer. But with Christ at his side, and in his heart, Paul learned to endure all manner of difficulty.

Many years ago, I had a chance to share a day of workshops with Don Moen, a noted biblical song-writer for worship and singing. You may know his most famous song, with these simple words of profound faith:

Oh, God will make a way,
Where there seems to be no way,
He works in ways we cannot see,
He will make a way for me.

He will be my guide,
Hold me closely to His side.
With love and strength for each new day,
He will make a way, He will make a way.

A long-time Conference Minister friend, now retired, Rev. Jim Antal of Massachusetts, often called upon us as Ministers, to ask ourselves, ***"What would I do if I were brave and faithful?"*** Yes, just what might WE do, what could be done in God's holy name, if indeed we were brave and faithful? I don't consider myself very brave, and only God knows if I am even remotely faithful. But this I do know, and that is, that I thank God that God has put me in this boat called life – storms and all—in this boat filled with a rainbow of hopes and dreams and colors. Yes, we – you and I and St. John's – can do ALL things, through Christ who strengthens us!

Let us pray: Thank you, O God, for being our guide, making a way for us, even when there seems to be no way. Help us, we pray, to realize that Jesus strengthens us to be the disciples we are called to become. Amen.

February 27: Faith, Part 1—Overview

Spiritual Nugget #5

Faith is trusting in something you cannot explicitly prove.

Is it not true that everything mentioned in the Bible cannot be explained with absolute certainty? As Christians, don't we sometimes need to accept God's Word based on faith? However, those hostile to Christianity often use any apparent discrepancies to raise doubt, to undermine or to dismiss the moral authority of the scripture instead of searching for a reasonable explanation consistent with Christian theology.

What does the Bible mean by *faith*? Fortunately the Bible gives us a clear definition of faith:

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. (Hebrews 11:1)

So simply put, the biblical definition of faith contains two aspects:

1. Intellectual assent. Intellectual assent is believing something to be true.
2. Trust. Trust is actually relying on the fact that the something is true.

A chair is often used to help illustrate this concept. Intellectual assent is *recognizing* that a chair is a chair and *agreeing* that it is designed to support a person who sits on it. Trust is actually *sitting in the chair*.

Understanding these two aspects of faith is crucial. Many people believe certain facts about Jesus Christ. Many people will *intellectually* agree with the facts the Bible declares about Jesus. But knowing those facts to be true is not what the Bible means by "faith". The **biblical definition of faith requires intellectual assent to the facts and trust in the facts.**

In addition, what is the implication of *faith* with regards to salvation? Is believing that Jesus is God incarnate who died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins and was resurrected enough? Don't even the demons believe in God and in those facts?

¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder. (James 2:19)

As Christians, don't we need to personally and fully rely on the death of Christ as the atoning sacrifice for our sins? Isn't this saving faith? Doesn't a saving faith require us to believe in what the Bible says about who Jesus is, what He accomplished *and* fully trust in Jesus for our salvation?

³¹ They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." (Acts 16:31)

Also, isn't Biblical faith always accompanied by the command to "*repent*" of sin?

³² For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him. (Matthew 21:32)

¹⁵ "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15).

Does the biblical definition of faith only apply to salvation? No! Doesn't it also equally apply to the rest of the Christian life? Are we not to believe what the Bible says and to obey it? Are we not to believe the promises of God and to live accordingly? Are we not to agree with the truth of God's Word and to allow ourselves to be transformed by it?

Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:2)

Why is this definition of faith so important? Why must *trust* accompany agreeing with facts?

- Without faith, it is impossible to please God. *And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Hebrews 11:6).*
- Without faith, we cannot be saved. ¹⁶ *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* ¹⁷ *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.* ¹⁸ *Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. (John 3:16).*
- Without faith, the Christian life cannot be what God intends it to be. ¹⁰ *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10:10).*

Spiritual Nugget #6

*While faith is the foundation and content of God's message,
hope is the attitude and focus and
love is the action!*

February 28: Faith, Part 2—Faith Without Works Is Dead

In his epistle, there are some verses labeled “Faith and Deeds” where the apostle James makes the statement “... *faith without works is dead*”.

14 What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? 15 Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? 17 In the same way, **faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.**

18 But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. 19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

20 You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? 21 Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his **faith was made complete by what he did.** 23 And the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,” and he was called God’s friend.

24 You see that **a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.** 25 In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? 26 As the body without the spirit is dead, so **faith without deeds is dead.** (James 2:20-26).

Some people find this statement confusing or even contradictory to the concept of salvation by grace only. So what does James mean? Isn't James teaching us that a Christian faith without works is a dead faith because the **lack of works reveals an unchanged life or a spiritually dead heart?** Doesn't the Bible contain many Scriptures that clearly teach that **true saving faith will result in an inner transformed life, which is outwardly demonstrated by the "works" we do?** Therefore doesn't how we live reveal what we believe and whether the faith we profess to have is a living faith?

Sometimes these verses are taken out of context in an attempt to create and justify a works-based system of righteousness! But aren't such interpretations clearly contrary to many other Scriptures? Is James claiming that our works make us righteous before God? Clearly not! Isn't he simply pointing out that that real saving faith is demonstrated by good works? **Works are not the cause of salvation; works are the evidence of salvation!** A person who claims to be a Christian yet lives in willful disobedience to Christ with a life that shows no works has a false or dead faith and is not saved. Consequently, isn't James actually making a clear contrast between two different types of faith—genuine faith that saves and a false faith that is dead?

Don't many people profess to be Christians, yet their lives and their priorities indicate otherwise? **Didn't Jesus address this situation when He said “By their fruit you will recognize them?”**

***16 By their fruit you will recognize them.** Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? 17 Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. 19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

20 Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

True and False Disciples. ***21 “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’***

23 Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’ (Matthew 7:16-23)

Notice that the message of Jesus is the same as the message of James. **Obedience to God is the mark of true saving faith.** James uses the examples of Abraham and Rahab to show the type of works that demonstrate salvation, and both of those examples are of people who obeyed God in faith. Saying we believe in Jesus does not save us, nor does attend religious worship services. What saves us is the Holy Spirit's regeneration of our hearts, and that regeneration will be seen in a life of faith demonstrated by ongoing obedience to God.

Doesn't a misunderstanding of the relationship between faith and works come from a misunderstanding of what the Bible teaches about salvation? Aren't there really two errors in regards to the relationship between works and faith?

- The belief that one can "make a decision for Christ" or "pray a prayer of salvation," and based upon that profession of faith salvation occurs. This is also called "*decisional regeneration*" and is dangerous and deceptive. Often those who advocate this view of salvation say that once a person has prayed the sinners' prayer or made a profession of faith he is saved regardless of how he lives afterwards. This leads to the creation of a new category of person called the "carnal Christian" in order to excuse the ungodly lifestyles of many who have made a one-time profession of faith in Christ. Yet, as we can see in James and other verses of Scripture, this type of profession of faith that does not result in a life of obedience to Christ is in reality a dead faith that does not save.
- Making works part of what justifies us before God. The mixture of works and faith together creates a works-based system of righteousness which is totally contrary to what Scripture teaches. Works come from true faith and a heart that has been justified by God by faith alone. The works that follow salvation do not make us righteous before God; they simply flow from a heart that has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit as naturally as water flows downhill. There is no conflict between what the Apostle Paul teaches...

⁴ Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. ⁵ However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness. ⁶ David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: (Romans 4:4-6)

Does understanding the relationship between faith and works really matter? Why? Isn't it important because it helps us avoid the errors mentioned above? Saying we believe in Christ does not save us, nor does praying a prayer of salvation or making a "decision" for Christ. Salvation is a sovereign act of God whereby unregenerate sinners have the "*washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit*" poured out on them thereby causing them to be born again.

*⁴ But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, ⁵ he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. **He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, (Titus 3:4-5)***

*He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." ³ **Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."** ⁴ "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" (John 3:2-4)*

When this happens, God gives us new hearts and puts a new spirit within us. God removes our sin-hardened hearts of stone and replaces them with hearts of flesh and fills them with the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit who causes us to walk in obedience to His statutes and judgments.

*²⁴ "For I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. ²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. ²⁶ **I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. (Ezekiel 36:24-27)***

Faith without works is a dead faith because it reveals a heart that has not been transformed by God. When we have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, our lives will demonstrate that by the way we live and our works of obedience to God. Genuine saving faith will be evident by:

- The "*fruit of the Spirit*" in our lives.

*²² But the **fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Gal. 5:22-24)***

- A desire to obey God and live a life that glorifies Him. Christians belong to Christ, and as His sheep they hear His voice and follow Him.

²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. ²⁷ **My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.** ²⁸ **I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.** ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one." (John 10:26-30)

- By good works and a life that desires to live in obedience to God. Works do not save us. When we are truly born again we will have hearts that are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. God's law is written in our hearts so that we might walk in His statutes and judgments.

⁸ For it is **by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—** ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old has gone, the new is here! (2 Corinthians 5:17)

In contrast, Paul tells us how to identify those whose hearts have not been transformed when he provides examples of "acts of the flesh."

¹⁹ The **acts of the flesh** are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that **those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.** (Galatians 5:19-21)

Faith without works is dead because it comes from a heart that has not been regenerated by God. It is an empty profession of faith from someone to whom Christ will say, "I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers."

Spiritual Nugget #7

*We are saved by faith—not by deeds!
But faith without deeds is a dead faith.*

Spiritual Nugget #8

*True saving faith
will result in an inner transformed life,
which is outwardly demonstrated by the "works" we do?*

February 29: Faith, Part 3—Branch & Vine Parable

What did Jesus mean by “bearing fruit” in the Vine and Branch parable in [John 15](#)? Jesus and His disciples are in the Upper Room on the night before His death and He tells his disciples:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (John 15:1-8)

What does the symbolism mean? Jesus is the “vine”, His Father is the “gardener” who cares for the branches to make them fruitful. The “branches” are all those who claim to be followers of Christ. The fruitful branches, such as Jesus’ eleven disciples, produce much fruit by their living union with Jesus. But those who become unproductive—meaning those who turn back from following Jesus after making a superficial commitment—will be separated from the vine. Unproductive followers will be cut off and tossed aside.

Jesus’s disciples would easily have recognized the symbolism because Israel was often referred to as a vine in the Old Testament Scriptures.

The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the nation of Israel, and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in. (Isaiah 5:7)

[Referring to Israel...] *I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine? (Jeremiah 2:21)*

Also, grapevines grew everywhere in Palestine. Jesus’ description of the pruning process represents exactly what a vinedresser did to produce good crops of grapes:

- Young branches were pruned severely for their first three years, and then allowed to bear fruit.
- Mature branches were pruned every December and January.
- Non-fruit-bearing branches were severely cut back to preserve the strength of the plant. The pruned branches were discarded, picked up, and thrown into the fire.

Also note that Jesus emphasizes that “I am the true vine!” While in the OT, Israel was often referred to as the vine that was planted, tended, and pruned by God, Jesus is making it clear that God’s children must now be connected to Him to bear fruit.

What is the duty of the “gardener”? God is the gardener or vinedresser. In Jesus’ analogy, the vinedresser has two primary duties:

- Cut off branches that bear no fruit.
- Prune the fruit-bearing branches. Note that the word “prune” also means to purge or to cleanse.

Doesn’t the analogy perfectly illustrate the relationship that must exist between Jesus and anyone who wants to be His disciple? When we apply the analogy to believers, doesn’t it teach that there are two types of believers?

- Those who truly believe and whose lives bear some fruit.
- Those who do not believe and consequently are cut off and cast into eternal fire.

Also, even though at the time Jesus was addressing His eleven disciples, isn't it clear that the analogy applies to all believers? Isn't Jesus teaching that believers have a choice to make—to be a real branch that bears fruit or an unproductive branch that will be thrown away and burned? Therefore, shouldn't we conclude from this analogy that the essence of a believer's life is to be productive—to bear fruit in some way that brings glory to God?

How does the pruning process work? How does God carefully prune a believer—trimming away sins, habits, etc... in order to help the believer bear even more fruit? Doesn't He sometimes allow troubles, even pain and suffering to shape and mold believers? Though God does not delight when pruning, isn't He working carefully to prune each believer at the right spots so we can bear more fruit and become more Christ like? Of course, sometimes the pruning process may cause a believer to wonder why some believers seem to get by with little pruning while others seem to receive extensive pruning. While the pruning knife may hurt initially, like tough love applied by parents to their children, isn't it beneficial in the long term from a spiritual perspective?

What exactly is God's "pruning knife?" Is it suffering? Troubles? Or, is it the Word of God?

³You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. (John 15:3-4)

Notice that Jesus clearly make a distinction between two kinds of pruning.

1. *Cutting off* branches.
2. *Cutting back* branches.

Fruitful branches are cut back to promote growth. In other words, God must sometimes discipline us to strengthen our character and faith. But branches that don't bear fruit are cut off because not only are they worthless, but they often infect the rest of the tree. People who won't bear fruit for God or block the efforts of believers will be cut off from His live-giving power.

Does not this passage teach that initial salvation comes through hearing the Word of God? And that continued pruning is done by the Word of God?

How do believers "remain in Christ"? Doesn't remaining in Christ include the following:

1. **Believing that Christ is God's son.**
¹⁵If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. (1 John 4:15)
2. **Receiving Christ as Savior and Lord.**
¹²Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— (John 1:12)
3. **Doing what God says.**
²⁴The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us. (1 John 3:24)
4. **Continuing to believe the gospel.**
²⁴As for you, see that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. (1 John 2:24)
5. **Relating in love to the community of believers—Christ's body.**
¹²My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. (John 15:12)

Many people try to be good, honest people who do what is right. But Jesus says that the only way to live a truly good life is to stay close to Him, like a branch attached to the vine. Apart from Christ, our efforts are unfruitful.

What is Christian “fruit”? The Scripture describes genuine, spiritual fruit in several ways:

- **Christ like character.**

*²² But the **fruit of the Spirit** is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5:22-24)*

*⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶ and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷ and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. ⁸ For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, **they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.** (2 Peter 1:5-8)*

*⁸ For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light ⁹ (for the **fruit of the light** consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) (Ephesians 5:9)*

Doesn't this list of characteristics actually describe the traits of Jesus? So how can believers develop these traits? Isn't it by remaining in Christ? By remaining in His Word? In fact, Charles Spurgeon, one of the preachers of the 19th century, claimed that “It is the Word that prunes the Christian. It is the truth that purges him.”

*⁵ “I am the vine; you are the branches. **If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.** (Galatians 5:5)*

However, notice that Jesus emphasize the importance of “being in me” and gives a grim warning to those do not remain in Him.

*⁶ **If you do not remain in me**, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, **thrown into the fire and burned.** (John 15:6)*

- **Joy and love.**

*⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. ⁹ “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you this so that **my joy may be in you** and that your joy may be complete. ¹² My command is this: **Love each other as I have loved you.** (John 15:7-12)*

- **Praising God in worship.**

*¹⁵ Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually **offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name.** (Hebrews 13:15)*

- **Good Works.**

*¹⁰ For we are God's handiwork, **created in Christ Jesus to do good works**, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:10)*

Sometimes Christians seem to shy away from “works” because they are taught that we are saved by grace, not “works.” But are we not saved to do good works in Christ's name—thereby bring glory to God?

⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Faith and Deeds. ¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims **to have faith but has no deeds?** Can such faith save them? ¹⁵ Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. ¹⁶ If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? ¹⁷ In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. ¹⁸ But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. ¹⁹ You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

²⁰ You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? ²¹ Was not our father **Abraham** considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? ²² You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his **faith was made complete by what he did.** ²³ And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. ²⁴ You see that **a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.** ²⁵ In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? ²⁶ **As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. (James 2:14-26)**

⁹ For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives ¹⁰ so that you may **live a life worthy of the Lord and please him** in every way: **bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God,** ¹¹ being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, **(Colossians 1:9-10)**

- **Winning Others to Christ.**

³⁵ Don't you have a saying, 'It's still four months until harvest'? I tell you, open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. ³⁶ Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. **(John 4:35-36)**

¹³ I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) **in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles. (Romans 1:13)**

However, the objective of leading people to Christ is not about twisting as many arms as possible. Instead, should we not let Jesus build His character traits in us and then the witnessing opportunities to spread the Word of God to others will come will.

March 1: Personal Reflection By Judy Hodges

Researchers believe that Jesus was crucified on Friday, April 3, 33 AD and died at about 3 PM.*

For me, knowing the actual date and time is very moving. I think we tend to forget that Jesus was “really real” and fully human. A long time ago my daughter made up a song as she swung on a swing set – something about Mary telling Jesus to go brush his teeth. I wonder; did he brush his teeth? Was he a good student in school, or did his mind wander? Did he ever mouth off to his parents? (“You’re not my real father!”) What did he do in the years between birth and age 12, and between 12 and 30? Did he already know and understand who he was? Was he preaching already and we just have no record of it? Was he an apprentice carpenter or of some other trade?

Part of my fascination with history stems from realizing those people in the past were like us: had mostly the same hopes and dreams, fear of change and of the future, and so on. Jesus must have been terrified of what was happening and the pain, just like we would have been. Doesn’t it absolutely make sense he would cry out, “*Father, father, why did you abandon me?*”

³⁴ And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”). (Mark 15:34)

⁴⁶ About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”) (Matthew 27:46)

But like many people who know they are dying, Jesus was also braver than we can imagine. One of his last thoughts was taking care of the living by entrusting his mother to John.

²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, “Woman here is your son,” ²⁷ and to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” From that time on, this disciple took her into his home. (John 19:26-27)

Jesus was truly one of us.

* KÖSTENBERGER, ANDREAS. “April 3, AD 33: Why We Believe We Can Know the Exact Date Jesus Died”, Center For Biblical Studies At Midwestern Seminary, April 8, 2020, website.

March 2: Origin & Meaning of Baptism

What is the purpose of baptism? Is it not an outward sign or proclamation of our inward conversion? In other words, baptism is a ceremonial act undertaken after a person accepts Jesus Christ as his or her Lord and Savior. The act of baptism is usually done in the presence of the church body as a public proclamation of one's faith.

Like most of the essential doctrines and rites of the Christian faith baptism has deep symbolic roots in the Old Testament and profound implications for New Testament believers.

The origins of baptism can be seen in story of the flood as described in the book of 1 Peter.

*¹⁸ For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit. ¹⁹ After being made alive, he went and made proclamation to the imprisoned spirits— ²⁰ to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, **were saved through water,** ²¹ and **this water symbolizes baptism** that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, **(1 Peter 3:20-21)***

The symbolism can also be seen in the first Passover prior to the exodus, in the exodus itself, in the crossing of the red sea, in the cleansing rituals under the Law, and in the rite of circumcision. Linguistically and historically, it can be linked with most of the cleansing and purification rituals of Judaism, especially the sprinkling with water or with the blood of sacrificed animals using hyssop. (See Exodus 12:22, Leviticus 14; Numbers 19, Psalms 51:7, John 19:29 and Hebrews 9:19)

Jews practiced baptism as a traditional act of purification and the initiation of converts to Judaism long before the coming of the Messiah. The origins of baptism might be found in the book of Leviticus where the Levite priests were commanded to perform a symbolic cleansing in water before and after performing their priestly duties. Leviticus tell us,

*"He is to put on the sacred linen tunic, with linen undergarments next to his body; he is to tie the linen sash around him and put on the linen turban. These are sacred garments; so he must bathe himself with water before he puts them on." **(Leviticus 16:4)***

Scripture also states,

*"Then Aaron is to go into the Tent of Meeting and take off the linen garments he put on before he entered the Most Holy Place, and he is to leave them there. He shall bathe himself with water in a holy place and put on his regular garments. Then he shall come out and sacrifice the burnt offering for himself and the burnt offering for the people, to make atonement for himself and for the people." **(Leviticus 16:23-24)***

Although the act described in these Old Testament passages was not specifically called "*baptism*," it does seem to demonstrate how important and holy ceremonial (and practical) cleansing is to God? It also follows the general pattern in scripture of progressive revelation (first the physical, then the spiritual) as God demonstrates His will and His character to His people in ever increasing detail and clarity.

The subject of baptism is initially introduced in the New Testament through accounts of the ministry of John the Baptist. Although we encounter John in the pages of the Gospels, he was actually an Old Testament prophet.

John was under the law, not grace, and his mission, to prepare the way for Christ, came prior to the inauguration of the Kingdom of God.

⁷ As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. ⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."

¹¹ Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. ¹⁴ And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. ¹⁵ Whoever has ears, let them hear. (Matthew 11:7-15).

John's "baptism of repentance" followed this paradigm of cleansing, although the final cleansing from sin is only available through Christ. John's baptism was the foreshadowing of Christ's baptism to cleanse us from sin.

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

3 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Tracōnitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene— ² during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to **John** son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the country around the Jordan, **preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.** ⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

"A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'⁵ Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. (Luke 3:3)

Paul in Ephesus

19 While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples ² and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

³ So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?" "John's baptism," they replied.

⁴ Paul said, "**John's baptism was a baptism of repentance.** He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." ⁵ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. (Acts 19:4)

John's audiences and baptismal candidates were also Jewish people under the law.

⁵ People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶ Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. (Matthew 3:5-6).

The more pious of the Jews deeply resented John's call to repentance and cleansing. Up to that point only gentile proselytes to the Jewish faith were required to be baptized. When John appeared, he told devout Jews that being Jewish was not enough.

⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matthew 3:9).

Like the gentiles, Jews needed to be cleansed and to make themselves ready (repent). The King is coming; prepare the way.

³ A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness **prepare the way for the LORD**; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. (Isaiah 40:3)

"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. (Malachi 3:1)

³ This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, '**Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.**'" (Matthew 3:3).

It is significant that Jesus as well as the Jewish people recognized John the Baptist as a true prophet of God under the law.

⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you." ¹¹ Truly I tell

you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he (Matthew 11:9-11)

As such, John literally spoke for God and his words were law, just as binding as the written law. That is why Jesus insisted on being baptized by John. In order to be an acceptable sacrifice for our sins, He had to be perfectly righteous, fulfilling all of God's law on our behalf including the latest oracles delivered by John.

The Baptism of Jesus.

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

¹⁵ Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. (Matthew 3:13-15)

However, the baptism ordained by Jesus prior to His ascension is fundamentally different from John's baptism in what it signifies. The baptism ordained by Jesus (Matthew 28) transcends John's baptism of repentance.

¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20)

⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesian 4:4-6)

While John's baptism was a cleansing rite, **the sacrament of baptism we practice today is a sign and seal of the new covenant in Christ Jesus in the same sense that circumcision was a sign and seal of the old covenant.**

*²⁰ to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, ²¹ and **this water symbolizes baptism** that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, (1 Peter 3:20-21)*

Baptism in the new covenant is the counterpart of and replacement for the rite of circumcision in the old covenant. Circumcision was a physical act producing a physical mark that signified a person was a member of the Jewish nation and household of faith either by birth or through conversion. **Baptism today is a physical act producing a spiritual mark that signifies a person is a member of the household of faith in Jesus Christ by new birth and conversion.**

²⁶ So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. (Galatians 3: 26-27)

*⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, **no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.** (John 3:5)*

Baptism is a better sign and seal for a better covenant.

⁶ But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises.

⁷ For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. ⁸ But God found fault with the people and said:

*"The **days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.***

⁹ It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord.

¹⁰ This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord.

I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

¹¹ No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, "Know the Lord," because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.

¹² For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

¹³ **By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear. (Hebrews 8:6-13)**

Baptism does not mutilate the body (the temple of the Holy Spirit), is available to everyone equally (not gender specific), and is wonderfully symbolic of our identification with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection.

Dead to Sin, Alive in Christ

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ²By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with that we should no longer be slaves to sin— ⁷because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.

(Romans 6:1-7)

The significance of baptism as a New Testament ritual is that, as believers in Jesus Christ, we are *baptized into His death and raised to walk in newness of life.*

³Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. (Romans 6:3-4)

The Lord taught the significance of baptism to the extent that He Himself was baptized by John the Baptist at the start of His ministry.

The Baptism and Testing of Jesus

⁹At that time **Jesus** came from Nazareth in Galilee and **was baptized by John** in the Jordan. **(Mark 1:9)**

Today, we enjoy the privilege of participating in the sacrament of baptism as a wonderful means of grace, rich in the beauty of symbolism. As we publicly identify with our Lord by physically acting out the drama of His suffering, death, burial and resurrection through the Christ ordained ritual of baptism we are spiritually marked as children of the household of faith by His grace and mercy.

Spiritual Nugget #9

***Baptism is a public, ceremonial statement
of our inner spiritual transformation and
faith in Jesus Christ.***

March 3: Spiritual Maturity, Part 1—Overview

Isn't Spiritual maturity achieved through becoming more like Jesus Christ? After salvation, doesn't every Christian begin the process of spiritual growth, with the intent to become spiritually mature? Is not personally engaging God's Word the most important factor in transforming our heart, mind and soul? Is not such a transformation essential for us to achieve the spiritual growth required to reach Christian maturity?

According to the Apostle Paul, **spiritual growth is an ongoing process** that will never end in this life. In fact, Paul states that he himself has not

¹²... already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:12-14)

Like Paul, don't we need to strive continually toward deeper knowledge of God in Christ?

Doesn't reaching Christian maturity require a radical reordering of one's priorities, shifting our focus from pleasing self to pleasing God, as well as learning to obey God? Isn't the key to maturity consistency and perseverance in doing those things we know will bring us closer to God? These practices are referred to as the spiritual disciplines and include things such as: Bible reading, Bible study, Prayer, Fellowship, Service, and Stewardship.

Is it not true that no matter how hard we might work on those things none of this is possible without the enabling of the Holy Spirit within us!

Paul tells us that we're to "walk by the Spirit."

*¹⁴For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. ¹⁶So I say, **walk by the Spirit**, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷For **the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. (Galatians 5:16)***

The Greek word used here for "walk" actually means "to walk with a purpose in view." Later in the same chapter, Paul tells us again that we're to "walk by the Spirit." Here, the word translated "walk" has the idea of taking things "step by step, one step at a time." It is learning to walk under the instruction of another—the Holy Spirit. Being filled with the Spirit means we walk under the Spirit's control.

Evidence of Spiritual Maturity

When we become Christians, doesn't the Scripture say that we are given all we need for spiritual maturity? Peter tells us that:

*³**His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life** through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. (2 Peter 1:3)*

God alone is our resource, and all growth comes by grace through Him. However, we are responsible to make the choice to obey. Peter again helps us in this area:

⁵For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. ⁸For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:5-8)

Being effective and fruitful in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus is the essence of spiritual maturity! Note that there is a difference between *knowing Jesus* versus *knowing about Jesus*!

As we submit more and more to the Spirit's control to become more Christ-like in our attitude and behavior, how do we evaluate how well we are doing in our spiritual transformation? How do we gauge our progress toward reaching spiritual maturity? Perhaps we could compare our attitudes and behavior against **several different "indicators of Christian maturity"** mentioned in the scripture such as:

- **Ten Commandments.**

And God spoke all these words:

² *"I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*

³ ***"You shall have no other gods before me.***

⁴ ***"You shall not make for yourself an image** in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. ⁵ **You shall not bow down to them or worship them;** for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, ⁶ but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.*

⁷ ***"You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God,** for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.*

⁸ ***"Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.** ⁹ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns.*

¹¹ *For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.*

¹² ***"Honor your father and your mother,** so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.*

¹³ ***"You shall not murder.***

¹⁴ ***"You shall not commit adultery.***

¹⁵ ***"You shall not steal.***

¹⁶ ***"You shall not give false testimony** against your neighbor.*

¹⁷ ***"You shall not covet your neighbor's house.** You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female servant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."*

¹⁸ *When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance ¹⁹ and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die." (Exodus 20:1-18)*

- **Jesus' Great Commission.**

¹⁶ *Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ **Then Jesus came to them and said,** "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore **go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,** ²⁰ **and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.** And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

- **Jesus' Greatest Commandment.**

³⁴ *Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵ One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶ **"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"***

³⁷ *Jesus replied: "**Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.**" ³⁸ **This is the first and greatest commandment.** (Matthew 22:34-38)*

- **Jesus's Second Greatest Commandment.**

³⁹ *And **the second** is like it: **'Love your neighbor as yourself.'** ⁴⁰ *All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:39-40)**

March 4: Spiritual Maturity, Part 2—Indicators *continued*...

- **Fruit of the Spirit.** If we strive to “walk in the Spirit”, should we not see evidence of “fruit of the Spirit” in our lives? Do not these “fruits” represent characteristics of spiritual maturity?

*²² But the **fruit of the Spirit** is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ **Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.** (Galatians 5:22-23)*

Note that Paul emphasizes the fruit of the Spirit characteristics by contrasting the “fruit” with the characteristics associated with walking in the flesh?

*¹³ You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; ¹⁶ So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want ... ¹⁹ **The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that **those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.** (Galatians 5:13, 16-17, 19-21)***

- **The Beatitudes from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.**

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ² and he began to teach them. He said:

*³ **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***

*⁴ **“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.***

*⁵ **“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.***

*⁶ **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.***

*⁷ **“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.***

*⁸ **“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.***

*⁹ **“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.***

*¹⁰ **“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***

*¹¹ **“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:1-11)***

- **The “One Another” Commandments.**

1. *⁵⁰ “Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt among yourselves, and **be at peace with each other.**” (Mark 9:50)*
2. *³⁴ “A new command I give you: **Love one another.** As I have loved you, so you must **love one another.** ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you **love one another.**” (John 13:34-35)*
3. *¹⁰ **Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. (Romans 12:10)***
4. *¹³ Therefore let us **stop passing judgment on one another.** Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister. (Romans 14:13)*
5. *⁴ For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us [i.e., instruct one another], so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope. (Romans 15:4)*

6. ⁷ **Accept one another**, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. (Romans 15:7)
7. ¹⁶ **Greet one another with a holy kiss.** (Romans 16:16)
8. ³³ So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, **wait for one another**— (1 Corinthians 11:33, ESV)
9. ²⁵ so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have **equal concern for each other.** (1 Corinthians 12:25)
10. ¹⁵ If you bite and devour **each other**, watch out or you will be destroyed by **each other.** (Galatians 5:15)
11. ²⁶ Let us **not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.** (Galatians 5:26)
12. ² **Carry each other's burdens**, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:2)
13. ² Be completely **humble and gentle**; be **patient, bearing with one another in love.** (Ephesians 4:2)
14. ³² **Be kind and compassionate to one another,**... (Ephesians 4:32)
15. ³² **...forgiving each other**, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4:32),
16. ¹⁹ **speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs** from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, (Ephesians 5:19)
17. ²¹ **Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.** (Ephesians 5:21)
18. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, **in humility value others** [one another] **above yourselves,** (Philippians 2:3)
19. ⁹ **Do not lie to each other**, since you have taken off your old self with its practices (Colossians 3:9)
20. ¹³ **Bear with each other and forgive one another** if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. (Colossians 3:13)
21. ¹⁶ Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as **you teach and admonish one another** with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. (Colossians 3:16)
22. ¹² May the Lord make **your love increase and overflow for each other** and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. (1 Thessalonians 3:12)
23. ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but **encouraging one another**—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:25)
24. ¹³ But **encourage one another daily**, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. (Hebrews 3:13)
25. ¹¹ Therefore **encourage one another and build each other up**, just as in fact you are doing. (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

26. ²⁴ *And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, (Hebrews 10:24)*
27. ¹¹ *Brothers and sisters, **do not slander one another**. Anyone who speaks against a brother or sister or judges them speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it. (James 4:11)*
28. ⁹ ***Don't grumble against one another**, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! (James 5:9)*
29. ¹⁶ *Therefore **confess your sins to each other and pray for each other** so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. (James 5:16)*
30. ⁸ *Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, **love one another**, be compassionate and humble. (1 Peter 3:8)*
31. ⁹ ***Offer hospitality to one another** without grumbling. (1 Peter 4:9)*
32. ¹⁰ *Each of you should **use whatever gift you have received to serve others**, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. (1 Peter 4:10)*
33. ⁵ *In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders. All of you, **clothe yourselves with humility toward one another ...** (1 Peter 5:5)*

Spiritual Nugget #10

*If we strive to walk in the Spirit,
should we not see evidence in our lives
of "fruit of the Spirit" such as
love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness,
goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control?*

March 5: Personal Devotion By Dale Myers

Theme: Finding Peace in Jesus Christ

Charlotte Elliott, a Victorian hymn writer, was born in the south London district of Clapham in 1789 and died in Brighton, England, in 1871. Her grandfather was a famous evangelical preacher. Her family, who belonged to the evangelical wing of the Anglican Church, taught her Christian piety.

The hymn “*Just As I Am*” was written by Charlotte as she languished in the depths of physical and emotional despair. Charlotte, at the age of forty-five, felt she was useless as a disciple for God. As she lay in her sick bed, she mentally enumerated her blessings and writing them in verses that became lyrics for the hymn.

Growing up in England at the end of the eighteenth century, Charlotte lived a carefree life in her younger years. She was a gifted artist and became popular for her portrait work. In addition to her artistic talents, she wrote humorous verses which were published to some acclaim. However, when she reached thirty year of age, her health began to fail. By the time she was thirty-one, she was bedridden and disabled for the rest of her life. The swift decline of her health and her inability to enjoy the life she had known led her to become despondent.

In 1822, the noted Swiss evangelist Henri Cesar Malan was visiting the city of Brighton, England. Charlotte’s father asked him to visit their home and to speak with Charlotte. During the discussion Charlotte shared she did not how to find Christ. Malan’s reply was, “*Come to Him just as you are.*” Milan would become her lifelong spiritual mentor. He counseled her to replace her rage and inner conflict with peace, and simple **faith in God**; from that day on, she turned her literary talents to writing hymns.

Milan’s simple encouragement brought Charlotte **hope** as she made a personal commitment to Christ. While her physical health did not change, her **emotional state improved dramatically**. From that day forward she celebrated what she called a “spiritual birthday” each year to commemorate the day on which she turned over her life to Christ.

Several years passed. Charlotte’s brother, a pastor, was trying to raise enough money to build a school for the children of the poor clergymen. To assist in the fund raising, he had organized a bazaar. Members of the parish were hard at work making handicrafts and baked goods to donate. But Charlotte, being bedridden, was unable to help, yet longing to do something to support the project.

On the day of the bazaar, after her family had left the house Charlotte was alone. She gathered pen and paper and decided to write down the reasons for her trust in Christ under the title “*Him that Cometh to Me I Will in No Wise Cast Out*” based on the following scripture. The stanzas became what we know today as the hymn “*Just As I Am*”.

³⁷All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. (John 6:37)

Charlotte’s sister-in-law, returning from the bazaar, found the poem and, without Charlotte’s knowledge, had it printed as a leaflet in 1835. The following year it was included in a book of Charlotte’s poetry titled *The Invalid’s Hymn Book*.

Her hymn “*Just As I Am*” brought in more funds for the building project than all the other money-raising efforts combined. In a letter, her brother wrote, “*In the course of a long ministry, I hope to have been permitted to see some fruit of my labors; but I feel more has been done by a single hymn of my sister.*”

While Charlotte was plagued with illness, pain, and fatigue for over fifty-one years, she wrote several books and over 150 hymns, many of which were especially aimed at comforting those who were ill or suffering. When she died on September 22, 1871, at the age of eighty-two, she left a rich legacy. In the years since she wrote "*Just As I Am*", countless Christians have shared her experience of faith and renewed their commitment to Christ through her simple, yet moving words.

Just As I Am

Just as I am, without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidst me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, and waiting not
To rid my soul of one dark blot,
To Thee whose blood can cleanse each spot,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, though tossed about
With many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fightings and fears within, without,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind;
Sight, riches, healing of the mind,
Yea, all I need in Thee to find,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

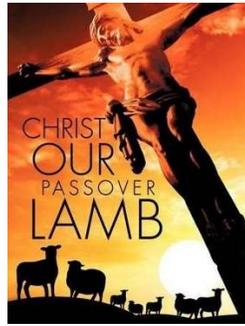
Just as I am, Thou wilt receive,
Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
Because Thy promise I believe,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, Thy love unknown
Hath broken every barrier down;
Now, to be Thine, yea, Thine alone,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Consider the repetition of the stanza, "*O Lamb of God, I Come.*" Does it not express a commitment to a Jesus-centered life? People aren't "*good enough*" or "*not good enough*" to come to Jesus. It is not through God's initiative, pardon, promises, and love mentioned throughout the hymn that everyone can come to Jesus? Just like Elliott, we all may face physical and mental illness, fears, conflict, and doubt during our lives! But we can still find peace in Jesus Christ!

Because of its simple but powerful message, this hymn has been widely used at the end of evangelical crusades to inspire people to make a commitment to Christ. "*We always began with 'Just as I Am' because Billy felt it was the most effective invitation hymn, inviting people to make a commitment to Christ,*" Cliff Barrows, Billy Graham's longtime musical director, said in a 2005 interview.

March 6: The Symbolism of Jesus Christ as Our Passover Lamb, Part 1



Historical Perspective on the Jewish Passover

Jewish Perspective: For Jews, Passover is a joyous festival celebrated yearly world-wide. Always falling near the Christian holiday of Easter in months of March/April, it offers a message of redemption. The separation of Judaism and Christianity basically falls around the question of the Messiahship of Jesus. The Passover message, as originally given and presently celebrated, bridges the gap of separation. Not that Biblical Christianity is a continuation of Judaism. It is not. Biblical Christianity, though, is very consistent with Biblical Judaism. The Passover message, if properly understood, will shed light on God's promise of redemption through the true Passover lamb—Jesus Christ.

Christian Perspective: Passover is a feast that needs to be understood since the roots of Christianity are in Biblical Judaism. Communion is an ordinance given to the church that has its origin in the Jewish Passover. It was Jesus himself who instituted the Lord's Supper—communion—at His last Passover Seder with His disciples. An understanding of Passover is helpful to a Christian's understanding of his/her heritage.

Before discussing the symbolism of Jesus as our Passover Lamb, let's first briefly review the concept of the Jewish Passover Meal. The **Passover is the Jewish celebration of God's liberating the Israelites from Egyptian slavery** in 1513 B.C.E. God commanded the Israelites to slaughter a lamb just after sunset on Nisan 14 and to eat it on the same night. The Israelites measured their day from sunset to sunset. Thus, the Israelites slaughtered the lamb and ate the Passover meal at the start of Nisan 14. God commanded the Israelites to remember that important event each year on the 14th day of the Jewish month Abib, which was later called Nisan.

⁵ The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. ⁶ Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the members of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. ⁷ Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs. ⁸ That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast. (Exodus 12:5-8)

⁴² Because the LORD kept vigil that night to bring them out of Egypt, on this night all the Israelites are to keep vigil to honor the LORD for the generations to come. (Exodus 12:42)

⁵ The LORD's Passover begins at twilight on the fourteenth day of the first month. (Leviticus 23:5).

The word "**Passover**" refers to the time when God spared the Israelites from the plague that killed every firstborn in Egypt.

*²⁵ When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony. ²⁶ And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' ²⁷ then tell them, 'It is the **Passover sacrifice to the LORD**, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.'" Then the people bowed down and worshiped. (Exodus 12:25-27)*

*¹⁴ "In days to come, when your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' say to him, 'With a mighty hand the **LORD brought us out of Egypt**, out of the land of slavery. ¹⁵ When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go,*

the LORD killed the firstborn of both people and animals in Egypt. This is why I sacrifice to the LORD the first male offspring of every womb and redeem each of my firstborn sons.' (Exodus 13:14-15)

Before God carried out this devastating plague, he told the Israelites to splash the blood of a slaughtered lamb or goat on their doorways. God would see this sign and “pass over” their homes and spare their firstborn

*²¹ Then Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, “Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the Passover lamb. ²² Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it into the blood in the basin and **put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe**. None of you shall go out of the door of your house until morning. (Exodus 12:21-22)*

*⁷ Then they are to **take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs**. ... ¹³ **The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you**. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt. (Exodus 12:7, 13)*

Jesus as The Passover Lamb

After Jesus celebrated the Passover on Nisan 14, 33 C.E., he introduced a new observance—the **Lord’s Supper**.

*¹⁹ **And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁰ In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. (Luke 22:19-20)***

Jesus’ ransom sacrifice is considered superior to the Jewish Passover sacrifice in that it **frees all people from slavery to sin and death**.

*²⁸ **just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:28)***

*¹⁵ For this reason **Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant. (Hebrews 9:15)***

While the apostle Paul was staying in Ephesus in the Spring, possibly in the year 55 A.D., he was composing his first letter to the Corinthians. He was planning on staying in Ephesus until Pentecost (1 Cor. 16:8). This means that the Jewish Passover was very much on his mind, either because preparations were under way for it or it had just been celebrated. As Paul writes to the Corinthians about other issues, he justifies his conclusions with a statement upon which his readers obviously would have agreed: ***“Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7).***

The casual way in which Paul makes this affirmation suggests that this comparison was already familiar to the Corinthian church. Jesus died at the time of the Passover feast in Jerusalem. The Last Supper is portrayed as a Passover meal or something close to it by the writers of the Synoptic Gospels. The analogies which can be and have been drawn between the death of Christ and the sacrifice of the lamb at Passover are numerous and full of meaning for the church today. What follows is an examination of **Jesus as the Lamb of God**. Much of the symbolism of Jesus' last Passover week is lost to us because people are unaware of the Jewish customs of the time.

March 7: Jesus As Passover Lamb Verses Jewish Passover Lamb, Part 2

Jewish Passover Lamb	Jesus As Passover Lamb
<p>The Passover lamb was to be a "male without defect"</p> <p><i>The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. (Exodus 12:5)</i></p>	<p>This is the same description given to Jesus.</p> <p><i>For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. (1 Peter 1:18-19)</i></p>
<p>When the lamb was roasted and eaten, none of its bones were to be broken.</p> <p><i>"It must be eaten inside one house; take none of the meat outside the house. Do not break any of the bones. (Exodus 12:46)</i></p>	<p>This fact was also prophesized for the Messiah, whose bones were not to be broken. It was customary during crucifixion to break the leg bones of the person after a few hours in order to hasten their death. The only way a person could breathe when hanging on a cross was to push up with his legs, which was very exhausting. By breaking the legs, death followed soon by asphyxiation. However, in the case of Jesus, they broke the legs of the other two men, but did not break His, since He was already dead.</p> <p><i>The soldiers therefore came, and broke the legs of the first man, and of the other man who was crucified with Him; but coming to Jesus, when they saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs;... For these things came to pass, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, "Not a bone of Him shall be broken." (John 19:32, 33, 36)</i></p>
<p>The lamb was chosen five days before it was to be sacrificed.</p>	<p>Jesus came into the city of Jerusalem five days before the lamb was killed in the temple as the Passover sacrifice for the sins of the people of Israel. Therefore, Jesus entered Jerusalem on lamb selection day as the lamb of God.</p> <p><i>The next day he saw Jesus coming to him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29)</i></p> <p>The people did not understand the significance of this, since they greeted Him with palm branches and hailed Him as King, shouting "Hosanna," which means "save us."</p> <p><i>On the next day the great multitude who had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took the branches of the palm trees, and went out to meet Him, and began to cry out, "Hosanna! BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD, even the King of Israel." (John 12:12-13)</i></p> <p>And most of the multitude spread their garments in the road, and others were cutting branches from the trees, and spreading them in the road. (Matthew 21:8)</p> <p>And the multitudes going before Him, and those who followed after were crying out, saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David; BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD; Hosanna in the highest!" (Matthew 21:9)</p> <p>However, the Jewish people were not looking for a spiritual Savior, but a political savior to free them from the Roman tyranny. Also, the palm branches were a symbol of freedom and defiance, since Simon Maccabeus had entered Jerusalem with that symbolism.</p> <p><i>Simon Maccabeus entered the Akra at Jerusalem after its capture, "with thanksgiving, and branches of palm trees, and with harps, and cymbals, and with viols, and hymns, and songs: because there was destroyed a great enemy out of Israel!" (1 Maccabees 13:51; also see 2 Maccabees 10:7).</i></p> <p>Jesus' reaction was to weep, since He realized that the people did not understand the Messiah's purpose in coming.</p>

<p>The day Jesus was crucified was the day of the Passover celebration and the day that the Passover lamb was to be sacrificed.</p> <p>For the previous 1,200 years, the priest would blow the shophar (ram's horn) at 3:00 p.m. - the moment the lamb was sacrificed, and all the people would pause to contemplate the sacrifice for sins on behalf of the people of Israel.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>And when He approached, He saw the city and wept over it, (Luke 19:41)</i></p> <p>Jesus was put on the cross at the 3rd hour (9:00 am):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Darkness came over the land from 6th hour - 9th hour (i.e., noon - 3:00 pm) • <i>⁴⁶ Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." When he had said this, he breathed his last.</i> • Jesus dies at 9th hour which equates to 3:00 p.m. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ <i>And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "ELI, ELI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?" that is, "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAST THOU FORSAKEN ME?"... And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice, and yielded up His spirit. (Matthew 27:46, 50)</i> ✓ <i>When Jesus therefore had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And He bowed His head, and gave up His spirit. (John 19:30)</i> ✓ At that moment the curtain in the Jewish Temple was torn in two. <p>Jesus died at the moment that the Passover lamb was sacrificed and the shophar was blown from the Temple. The sacrifice of the lamb of God was fulfilled at the hour that the symbolic animal sacrifice usually took place.</p> <p>At the same time, the veil of the Temple (a three-inch thick, several story high cloth that demarked the Holy of Holies) tore from top to bottom — representing a removal of the separation between God and man.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ <i>And behind the second veil, there was a tabernacle which is called the Holy of Holies, (Hebrews 9:3)</i> ✓ <i>And behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, and the earth shook; and the rocks were split, (Matthew 27:51)</i> ✓ <i>And the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. (Mark 15:38)</i> ✓ <i>the sun being obscured; and the veil of the temple was torn in two. (Luke 23:45)</i> <p>Fifty days later, on the anniversary of the giving of the law (Pentecost), God left the earthly temple to inhabit those who call on the name of Jesus through His Holy Spirit.</p>
<p>The <i>Festival of Unleavened Bread</i> began Friday evening (at sunset).</p> <p>As part of the festival, the Jews would take some of the grain - the "First Fruits" of their harvest - to the Temple to offer as a sacrifice.</p> <p>In so doing, they were offering God all they had and trusting Him to provide the rest of the harvest.</p>	<p>It was at this point that Jesus was buried - planted in the ground - as He said right before His death.</p> <p><i>And Jesus answered them, saying, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. (John 12:23-24)</i></p> <p>Paul refers to Jesus as the first fruits of those raised from the dead in 1 Corinthians. As such, Jesus represents the fulfillment of God's promise to provide the rest of the harvest - resurrection of those who follow the Messiah.</p> <p><i>But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. (1 Corinthians 15:20)</i></p>
<p>Seder (The Jewish Passover Dinner)</p>	<p>Christian symbolism in the Passover occurs early in the Seder (the Passover dinner).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three matzahs are put together (representing the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). • The middle matzah is broken, and then <p><i>And when He had given thanks, He brake it, and said, "Take, eat: this is My body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of Me." (1 Corinthians 11:24)</i></p>

- Wrapped in a white cloth, and hidden, representing the death and burial of Jesus.

And so they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen wrappings with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. (John 19:40)

- The matzah itself is designed to represent Jesus, since it is striped and pierced, which was prophesized by Isaiah,

*But he was **pierced** through for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and by his **stripes** we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5)*

- Prophesized by David.

*For dogs have surrounded me; A band of evildoers has encompassed me; They **pierced** my hands and my feet. (Psalm 22:16)*

- Prophesized by Zechariah.

*"And I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have **pierced**; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him, like the bitter weeping over a first-born. (Zechariah 12:10)*

- Following the Seder meal, the "buried" matzah is "resurrected," which was foretold in the prophecies of David.

During a Passover Seder that Jesus proclaimed that the meal represented Himself and that He was instituting the **New Covenant**, which was foretold by Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah.

- ✓ *"Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a **new covenant** with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. (Jeremiah 31:31-33)*
- ✓ *"And I shall give them one heart, and shall put a new spirit within them. And I shall take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances, and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God. (Ezekiel 11:19-20)*
- ✓ *"I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you, And I will appoint you as a **covenant** to the people, As a light to the nations, (Isaiah 42:6)*

The celebration of this covenant has become the ordinance of communion in the Christian Church:

- At the end of the meal, Jesus took the unleavened bread, broke it, and said that it represented His body.

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of

	<p><i>the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."</i> (Matthew 26:26-28)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Then He took the cup of wine (which would have been the third cup of the Seder - the cup of redemption.) and said that it was the new covenant in His blood "poured out for you." <p><i>In the same way, after the supper He took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is poured out for you. (Luke 22:20)</i></p> <p>It is through the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that we are declared clean before God, allowing those of us who choose to accept the pardon, to commune with Him - both now and forevermore through the eternal life He offers.</p>
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It is very likely that the Synoptic Gospels identify the Last Supper with a Passover meal on a Thursday evening, which would be the beginning of Friday on a Jewish calendar. Numerous arguments which point in this direction include the following:

1. The Passover meal had to be eaten within the walled city of Jerusalem. Jesus ate the Last Supper meal in Jerusalem rather than in nearby Bethany where he had spent much time.
2. The Passover night had to be spent within greater Jerusalem, which would include Gethsemane. Jesus remained within greater Jerusalem instead of returning to Bethany.
3. It was customary to sit upright at an ordinary meal but to recline at the Passover meal. Jesus and his disciples were reclining at the Last Supper (Mark 14:18).
4. Palestinian Jews of the first century typically ate two meals a day. The first was in the morning and the second in late afternoon. The Last Supper, however, was eaten in the evening (Mark 14:17), which is what was required by the Law of Moses for the Passover (Exodus 12:8).
5. It was customary to end the Passover meal with the singing of the Hallel Psalms (Ps. 115-118). The Last Supper ended with a hymn (Matthew. 26:30; Mark 14:26).
6. An explanation of the elements of the meal was done in the Passover (Exodus 12:26-27). Jesus gave a new interpretation to the meaning of the bread and the fruit of the vine, possibly as the opportunity for such explanation was afforded by the Passover ritual.
7. It was a common custom to give some money to the poor at Passover. This custom was the rationale in the minds of the other apostles for why Judas left the supper (John 13:29).
8. The third cup of the Passover meal was called the "cup of blessing," which is the name Paul gives to the Eucharistic cup (1 Cor. 10:16).

There are differences, however, which for some present difficulties in identifying the Last Supper with a Passover observance. However, most of these differences, though, are dealt with fairly easily. For example, the term for "bread" is not exclusively used for leavened bread. The other arguments are mostly based on silence. However, it was not necessary for the Gospel writers to allude to every item of the Passover meal in their accounts of the Last Supper. Only those which were relevant to their focus were necessary, even though we may find it strange that no lamb was mentioned. Through careful study of rabbinic writings, some scholars have concluded that there is no insurmountable difficulty in all of the various actions noted above taking place on a feast day.

But regardless, what matters most and is beyond dispute is that both the Synoptic Gospels and also the Gospel of John point to Jesus as the Christian's Passover lamb. This is further confirmed by both the writings of Paul and also the already present belief of the early church, which was in existence before the writings of Paul. As C. K. Barrett said: "*Acceptance of Jesus as the Lamb of God is independent of chronology.*"⁷ Scholars will be debating the date of the Passover and the exact character of the Last Supper until the end of the world, but the truth that Jesus was crucified during the Passover season is beyond dispute. **The affirmation that the early church interpreted Jesus' death as a paschal sacrifice is unimpeachable.** Christians can raise their voices in unison with the utterance of John the Baptist and declare: "*Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*" (John 1:29).

March 8: A Personal Reflection By Henry Hopper

Static

Once upon a time people still saw visions.
But we have lost that ability.
Except for some meditators in deep meditation,
who lose all sense of time feeling totally empty of their rational, thinking mind.

But such occurrences we can experience if we pay attention.
That's the key. To pay attention.
Not sleeping or a napping or praying or clarifying your thoughts.
And not accepting "second hand" experiences that someone else has told us about.
It is rather like being in the actual presence of the prophet David instead of just reading a Psalm.
Where the background chaos or static drains away and
then you *feel* something new that isn't you but *is* you.
Another realm of being.

The trouble is our brain is constantly producing static
cutting down our larger perceptions.
One of the important purposes of meditation is to eliminate the static and
gain more of an access to the divine domain.
To actually sit with the Holy, the divine, the numinous.

The world has changed and we are stuck with words and gestures.
Searching the void for the incomprehensible and Holy
praying, singing, reading scriptures, preaching.....
A net of holes to capture the divine essence.
A ladder built of sticks and stones,
whereby we hope to reach to heaven.
Arguing intellectually for God.

Lent can be a journey to eliminate the static.
Five, ten, twenty, or thirty minutes a day in complete silence.
Let's do it!

March 9: How God Reveals Himself, Part 1—General & Special Revelation

Many religions claim their God is unknowable—that it is not possible to have a relationship with God. But isn't our Christian God different? Doesn't our Christian God clearly tell us that He wants a relationship with His creation? **In fact, doesn't our eternal salvation depend on having a relationship through Jesus Christ?** So, is it possible to learn about God?

Isn't it true that we cannot fully comprehend the nature and being of the one Christian God because?

- We are mortal whereas God is immortal.
- We are finite whereas God is infinite.
- We are temporal [bounded by time] whereas God is eternal [unbounded by time].
- We are physical beings whereas God is a spiritual being.
- We best understand that which we can see or portray. God cannot be seen. Neither can He be fully portrayed by any physical representation.

In addition, the Bible tells us of God being **incomprehensible**:

*Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; And His **greatness is unsearchable.** (Psalm 145:3)*

*"My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," says the LORD. "**For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.**" (Isaiah 55:8-9)*

*O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways! **For who has known the mind of the LORD?** Or who has become His counselor? (Romans 11:33-34)*

However, though God is beyond our full comprehension, hasn't He nevertheless revealed Himself and His purposes to us, at least to the fullest degree that we are able to receive and understand them? Moreover, hasn't God equipped us to recognize and relish the beauty and wonder of Himself and His creation by means of revelations? **God has provided both general revelation and special revelation to help us understand Him.**

We have *been given general revelation*. **General revelation refers to the general truths that can be known about God through His creation.**

"The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork." (Psalms 19:1)

According to this passage, God's existence and power can be clearly seen through observing the universe. The order, intricacy, and wonder of creation speak to the existence of a powerful and glorious Creator and to intelligent design.

²⁰ For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. (Romans 1:20)

According to this passage, God's eternal power and divine nature are "clearly seen" and "understood" from what has been made, and that there is no excuse for denying these facts. In Romans, **isn't the Bible saying that no one has an excuse for not believing in God because God has clearly revealed Himself through His creation?** Therefore isn't Paul answering a common question and criticism of Christianity, "How can a loving God send anyone to hell, especially someone who has never heard about Christ?" Paul answers the question by emphatically telling us that **God has revealed himself through His creation to all people**. Therefore if people choose to suppress the inherent truth they know to be true and live as they please, **they will have no excuse** before God on the Day of Judgment.

What kind of God can we infer from His creation? Doesn't creation imply a God of might, of intelligence, of intricate detail, of order, and of beauty; a God who controls powerful forces. Based on the above two Scriptures, perhaps a working

definition of general revelation would be "the revelation of God to all people, at all times, and in all places that proves that God exists and that He is intelligent, powerful, and transcendent?"

We have also been given **special revelation** that includes miraculous means. **Special revelation includes physical appearances of God, signs, dreams, visions, the written Word of God, and most importantly Jesus Christ.**

- The Bible records **God appearing in physical form** many times:

*⁸ Then the man and his wife heard the **sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden** in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. (Genesis 3:8)*

*The **LORD appeared** to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. (Genesis 18:1)*

*Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. ² There the angel of the **LORD appeared** to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. ³ So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up." ⁴ When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." (Exodus 3:1-4)*

*⁵ Then the **LORD came down** in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD.*

⁶ And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷ maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation." (Exodus 34:5-7)

- Bible records **God speaking to people through dreams**:

*¹² He had a **dream** in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. (Genesis 28:12)*

*⁵ Joseph had a **dream**, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. (Genesis 37:5)*

*⁵ At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solomon during the night in a **dream**, and God said, "Ask for whatever you want me to give you." (1 Kings 3:5)*

*In the second year of his reign, Nebuchadnezzar had dreams; his mind was troubled and he could not sleep.... ²⁶ The king asked Daniel (also called Belteshazzar), "Are you able to tell me what I saw in my **dream** and interpret it?" ²⁷ Daniel replied, "No wise man, enchanter, magician or diviner can explain to the king the mystery he has asked about, ²⁸ but there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries. He has shown King Nebuchadnezzar what will happen in days to come. ... ⁴⁶ Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor and ordered that an offering and incense be presented to him. ⁴⁷ The king said to Daniel, "Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery." ... ⁴⁸ Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men. ⁴⁹ Moreover, at Daniel's request the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego administrators over the province of Babylon, while Daniel himself remained at the royal court. (Daniel 2:25-49)*

March 10: How God Reveals Himself, Part 2—Special Revelation *continued*

We have also been given ***special revelation*** that includes miraculous means. ***Special revelation*** includes physical appearances of God, signs, dreams, visions, the written Word of God, and most importantly Jesus Christ.

- Bible records **God speaking to people through visions**:

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward" (Genesis 15:1)

³He stretched out what looked like a hand and took me by the hair of my head. The Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and in visions of God he took me to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the north gate of the inner court, where the idol that provokes to jealousy stood. ⁴And there before me was the glory of the God of Israel, as in the vision I had seen in the plain. (Ezekiel 8:3-4)

I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. ²I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. (2 Corinthians 12:1-2).

Daniel's Dream of Four Beasts. In the first year of Belshazzar king of Babylon, Daniel had a dream, and visions passed through his mind as he was lying in bed... ²Daniel said: "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me were the four winds of heaven churning up the great sea. ³Four great beasts, each different from the others, came up out of the sea... (Daniel 7:1-3)

- God revealed Himself through **His prophets**. Isn't there unequivocal evidence throughout Scripture of God speaking through His prophets over and over? What is the "common thread" in all these situations that enables the reader to clearly know when the prophet is speaking for God versus speaking for himself? Each time, the phrase begins with, "*Thus says the Lord...*"
*Get up, sanctify the people, and say, 'Sanctify yourselves for tomorrow, because **thus says the Lord God of Israel**: "There is an accursed thing in your midst, O Israel; you cannot stand before your enemies until you take away the accursed thing from among you." (Joshua 7:13)*
*Then a man of God came to Eli and said to him, "**Thus says the Lord**: 'Did I not clearly reveal Myself to the house of your father when they were in Egypt in Pharaoh's house?'*
- God reveals Himself by **His living Word—the incarnation as Jesus** of Nazareth. God used many approaches to send His message to people in the Old Testament. He spoke to Isaiah in visions (Isaiah 6), to Jacob in a dream (Genesis 28:10-22), and to both Abraham and Moses personally (Genesis 18; Exodus 31:18). Jewish people familiar with these stories would not have found it hard to believe that God was still revealing His will, but it was astonishing for them to think that God had revealed Himself by speaking through His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus is the fulfillment and culmination of God's revelation through the centuries. When we know Him, we have all we need to be saved from our sin and to have a perfect relationship with God.

Not only is Jesus the exact representative of God, but He is God Himself—the very God who spoke in the Old Testament times. He is eternal; He worked with the Father in creating the world (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16). We can have no clearer view of God than by looking at Christ.

The writer to the Hebrews acknowledges that God has spoken to us by His Son Jesus.

*"Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days **he has spoken to us by his Son**, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world" (Hebrews 1_1-2).*

Philip said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us." Jesus answered, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? **He who has seen Me has seen the Father**" (John 14:8-9a)

The Son is the image of the invisible God, ... (Colossians 1:15-18)

What can we infer about God from the *special revelation* of Jesus? Don't we learn about God's love, His forgiveness, His patience, His justice, His righteousness, His promise of eternal life and how to receive His gift of grace, etc... God became a human being!

¹ *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... ¹⁴ **The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.** We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1, 14).*

*In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days **he has spoken to us by his Son**, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. ³ **The Son** is the radiance of God's glory and **the exact representation of his being**, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. (Hebrews 1:1-3)*

Didn't God become a human being, in the Person of Jesus Christ, so He could better identify with us, to set an example for us, to teach us, to reveal Himself to us, and, most importantly, to provide salvation for us by humbling Himself in death on the cross? Isn't Jesus Christ the ultimate "special revelation" from God?

Who, being in very nature^[a] God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8).

- God reveals Himself in **His written Word—the Bible**.

¹² *For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12).*

¹⁶ **All Scripture is God-breathed** and is useful for **teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness**, ¹⁷ **so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.** (2 Timothy 3:16).

God miraculously guided the authors of Scripture to correctly record His message to mankind, while still using their own styles and personalities. Also, doesn't it seem that God was determined to have the truth regarding Him recorded in written form because He knew the inaccuracy and unreliability of oral tradition? He also probably understood that the dreams and visions of man can be misinterpreted. God decided to reveal everything that humanity needs to know about Him, what He expects, and what He has done for us in the Bible.

- God reveals Himself in "**signs**"—supernatural manifestations that cannot be duplicated by human effort to communicate with His people. *Signs* help point us in the right direction. They are intended to substantiate, confirm, and identify God's message and/or His messenger. Examples of *signs* include:
 - Communicates through a **storm** (Job 38:1),
 - Announces His presence by an **fire** (Exodus 19:18),
 - Speaks in a voice that sounds like **thunder** (1 Samuel 2:10; Job 37:2; Psalm 104:7; John 12:29)
 - Promises never to destroy the earth by flood using the a **rainbow** (Genesis 9:12-13)
 - Moses' shepherd's staff becomes a **serpent** (Exodus 4:3-5)
 - To convince Pharaoh to let his people go, God poured out the **ten plagues** (Deuteronomy 4:34; 6:22; 26:8)

March 11: A Personal Reflection By Harold Collier

In my early life, I did not really see the significance of or even understand the idea of Lent. Looking into the history of the Lenten season, I found the following helpful.

The development of Lent as a 40-day period of fasting and preparation for Easter took place gradually over time. By the end of the 4th century, there is evidence that Christians were observing a period of fasting and reparation for Easter. The Council of Nicaea in 325 AD mentioned a 40-day period of fasting, although the specific practices varied among regions. The duration of Lent as 40 days (excluding Sundays) became more universally recognized in the Western Christian tradition by the 6th century. The Lenten season continues to be a significant part of the liturgical calendar for many Christians, symbolizing a time of reflection, repentance, and spiritual preparation for the celebration of Easter.

But what does the season mean to me as an individual, to my family and our church? Occasionally I spend time reflecting, but more often my time is listening to others or reading and learning. I'm not very good at meditation. To me the Lenten season is a time to be together, sharing stories and testimonies of God at work in our lives. Our church has encouraged many others at various times to share. These individuals have been a blessing to those they touch. Many of them overcame hardships and were saved. Others, centered on their faith, were willing to share their story. I am encouraged, when I hear these individuals, who or are just like me, trying to overcome struggles, willing to step forward, or trying to have a better understanding of living a Christian life.

My strength and our strength lie in helping each other. Having a period where we focus our efforts at being the church offers such a great opportunity. Therefore, if I am giving up something for Lenten it is the time I spend not focusing on my faith, my family, and my church. I am hoping we share the spiritual preparation together on the road to Easter.

March 12: Stations of the Cross, Part 1—Overview

The Stations of the Cross, also known as the *Via Dolorosa*, is a narration of the final hours in the life of Jesus Christ on earth that continues to provide spiritual conviction for every Christian and application to our lives. **The Stations of the Cross:**

- **Serve as a reminder** of the humble manner in which Jesus was willing to set aside any privilege of deity in order to provide a path to salvation for humanity through His sacrifice.
- **Help us reflect upon and better appreciate** the intensity, emotions and suffering surrounding **the final events of Jesus' death.**

History

The exact origin of the devotional use of The Stations of the Cross is not entirely clear, though it is associated with Christian pilgrimages to Jerusalem in the early Christian centuries. The pilgrimage has been followed since early Christianity, beginning as soon as it became safe to do so after Constantine legalized the religion (mid-4th century). Those who were able to walk along the path Jesus walked on the way to his crucifixion were deeply moved by this experience. Yet, since the vast majority of Christians were not able to go to Jerusalem, *The Way of the Cross* enabled them to engage in a mini-pilgrimage of sorts, whereby they could focus on the key events of Jesus' last day. Originally, Byzantine pilgrims followed a similar path to the one taken today, but did not stop along the way. Over the centuries, the route has changed several times.

By the 8th century, the **route had changed**: beginning at the Garden of Gethsemane, pilgrims headed south to Mount Zion then doubled back around the Temple Mount to the Holy Sepulchre. During the Middle Ages there were two rival routes, based on a split in the Latin Church: those with churches to the west went westward and those with churches in the east went eastward.

From the 14th to 16th centuries, pilgrims followed the **Franciscan route**, which began at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and included eight stations. Around this time, the tradition of 14 Stations of the Cross was developing in Europe. To avoid disappointing European pilgrims, the difference was made up with the addition of six more stations.

During the Middle Ages, this practice got wrapped up with the granting of indulgences (i.e., remissions of temporal punishments for sins for which we have been forgiven). The **practice of indulgence was not based on scripture and was in fact one of the major reasons for the Protestant Reformation**. Thus, it's not surprising that Protestants didn't maintain the tradition of walking The Way of the Cross as an act of devotion since it seemed to include way too much theological baggage.

Today, the main route is that of the early Byzantine pilgrims, with 14 stations along the way. However, alternative routes are followed by those who have different opinions on the locations of various events. Anglicans believe Jesus would have been led north towards the Garden Tomb, while Dominican Catholics start from Herod's Palace near Jaffa Gate.

For most pilgrims, however, the exact location of each event is of little importance; the pilgrimage has great meaning due to its proximity to the original events and the reflection upon them along the way.

Tradition-Based versus Bible-Based Versions

There are several widely accepted versions of the “stations”, one version being biblical and the others being more “traditional” accounts of events in Jesus’ final hours. The “traditional” Stations of the Cross depicted unfamiliar events, including: three falls of Jesus, an encounter between Jesus and his mother, and an encounter between Jesus and a woman named Veronica. These stations were not derived directly from Scripture, but rather from ancient church tradition.

In the “traditional” form of the Stations of the Cross, however, stations 3, 4, 6, 7, and 9 are not explicitly biblical. Pope John Paul II seemed to have concerns about the lack of biblical foundation for the “traditional” Stations of the Cross. Therefore, in 1991, he instituted a new series of fourteen Stations of Cross, each of which was based on Scripture alone. The chart below shows both the “traditional” and the revised stations or “Biblical” stations.

Traditional Stations	Biblical-Based Stations
	1. Jesus on the Mount of Olives (Luke 22:39-46)
	2. Jesus, betrayed by Judas, is arrested (Luke 22:47-48)
	3. Jesus is condemned by the Sanhedrin (Luke 22:66-71)
	4. Peter denies Jesus (Luke 22:54-62)
1. Jesus is condemned to death	5. Jesus is judged by Pilate (Luke 23:13-25)
	6. Jesus is scourged and crowned with thorns. (Luke 22:63-65 ; John 19:2-3)
2. Jesus takes up his cross	7. Jesus takes up the cross (Mark 15:20)
3. Jesus falls for the first time	
4. Jesus meets his mother	
5. Jesus is helped by Simon the Cyrene to carry his cross	8. Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus to carry his cross (Luke 23:26)
6. Veronica wipes the face of Jesus	
7. Jesus falls for the second time	
8. Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem	9. Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem (Luke 23:27-31)
9. Jesus falls for the third time	
10. Jesus is stripped of his garments	
11. Jesus is nailed to the cross	10. Jesus is crucified (Luke 23:33, 47)
	11. Jesus promises his Kingdom to the good thief (Luke 23:33-34, 39-43)
	12. Jesus on the cross, his mother and his disciple (John 19:25-27)
12. Jesus dies on the cross	13. Jesus dies on the cross (Luke 23:44-46)
13. Jesus is taken down from the cross and given to his mother	
14. Jesus is laid in the tomb	14. Jesus is placed in the tomb (Luke 23:50-54)

March 13: Biblical Stations of the Cross, Part 1—Stations #1 to #7

1st Station of the Cross: Jesus Prays on the Mount of Olives

³⁹ Jesus went out as usual to the **Mount of Olives**, and his disciples followed him. ⁴⁰ On reaching the place, he said to them, "Pray that you will not fall into temptation." ⁴¹ **He withdrew** about a stone's throw beyond them, **knelt down and prayed**, ⁴² "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." ⁴³ An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. ⁴⁴ And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.^[a] ⁴⁵ When he rose from prayer and went back to the disciples, he found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow. ⁴⁶ "Why are you sleeping?" he asked them. "Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation." (Luke 22:39-46).

Jesus prayed on the Mount of Olives for His Father to take the cup from His hand that meant His death on the cross; it demonstrated the humanity of Jesus. It is not difficult to imagine how great His anticipation was concerning the events He was about to face. There comes a time in the life of all Christians when they must also choose between God's will and their own, and that choice, like Jesus' choice, displays the level of commitment and obedience to God, as well as the true condition of the heart. Even though Jesus was aware of the fate He was about to face when He prayed on the Mount of Olives for God to alter the events, His prayer was that the Father's will be done regardless of what the future held for Him. Even nailed to the cross with His life's breath slipping away, Jesus was still teaching us the importance of obedience to God's Word and the importance of trusting Him in every situation.

2nd Station of the Cross: Jesus is Betrayed by Judas and Arrested

⁴⁷ While he was still speaking a crowd came up, and the man who was called Judas, one of the Twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him, ⁴⁸ but Jesus asked him, "**Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?**" (Luke 22:47-48).

Judas not only became one of the most despised characters in history when he betrayed Jesus; he also became a haunting reminder to every Christian that there have been times they have fallen to temptation to sin. For the Christian, stumbling in sin is like betraying the One who gave His life for us. How much greater is that betrayal when the sin is a chosen behavior, deliberately turning away from spiritual conviction? Judas lived with Jesus and sat at His feet learning from Him for years. But because his heart was not truly transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, he fell away when tempted by Satan. As believers, we are told to "*examine ourselves*" to see if we are truly in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5).

3rd Station of the Cross: Jesus is Condemned by the Sanhedrin

⁶⁶ At daybreak the **council of the elders** of the people, both the chief priests and the teachers of the law, met together, and **Jesus was led before them**. ⁶⁷ "If you are the Messiah," they said, "tell us." Jesus answered, "If I tell you, you will not believe me, ⁶⁸ and if I asked you, you would not answer. ⁶⁹ But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God." ⁷⁰ They all asked, "Are you then the Son of God?" He replied, "You say that I am." ⁷¹ Then they said, "Why do we need any more testimony? We have heard it from his own lips." (Luke 22:66-71).

The Sanhedrin council, made up of seventy priests and scribes and one high priest, demanded that Pilate execute Jesus. This incident serves as a warning for all Christians to be careful not to exalt ourselves by self-righteously judging others. Biblical knowledge and exalted positions in this world still fall pitifully short of holy perfection, and prideful thinking can easily be the downfall of even the most pious among men. The Bible teaches us to respect positions of authority, but ultimately it is God's will and God's Word that should reign supreme in our lives. Christians are gifted with a baptism of God's Holy Spirit to comfort, teach, and guide them in every situation, allowing them to make every decision according to the perfect will of God, essentially negating an individual's need for religious rulers like the Sanhedrin. The Jewish people's entrusting supreme religious authority to the Sanhedrin led to corruption among many of the priests and scribes of the Sanhedrin, and when Jesus began to teach a doctrine that undermined their authority, they plotted against Him, ultimately demanding His crucifixion by the Roman government.

4th Station of the Cross: Peter Denies Jesus

⁵⁴ Then seizing him, they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest. Peter followed at a distance.

*⁵⁵ And when some there had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down together, Peter sat down with them. ⁵⁶ A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, "This man was with him." ⁵⁷ But **he denied** it. "Woman, I don't know him," he said. ⁵⁸ A little later someone else saw him and said, "You also are one of them." "Man, **I am not!**" **Peter replied.** ⁵⁹ About an hour later another asserted, "Certainly this fellow was with him, for he is a Galilean."*

*⁶⁰ Peter replied, "Man, **I don't know what you're talking about!**" Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed.*

*⁶¹ The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "**Before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.**" ⁶² And he went outside and wept bitterly. (Luke 22:54-62).*

When Jesus was arrested, a number of those present at the time accused Peter of being one of Jesus' followers. As previously predicted by Jesus, Peter denied knowing Jesus three times. Peter was Jesus' beloved and trusted disciple who witnessed many miracles firsthand, even walking on water with Jesus (Matthew 14:29-31). Even so, Peter demonstrated the weakness of humanity by denying Jesus for fear of also being arrested. Christians all over the world still face persecution and humiliation by the non-believing in society, from verbal abuse to beatings and death. People might self-righteously judge Peter for his denial of Jesus and his fear of what the Romans would do to him if they discovered his relationship with Jesus, but how many Bible-believing Christians can say they have never remained silent about their faith in the face of discrimination, public or private? Such a silence demonstrates the imperfect frailty of humanity. Peter's faith was an imperfect faith, primarily because he was not indwelt by the Holy Spirit at that time. After the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost to live in the hearts of believers (Acts 2), Peter was a valiant lion of faith, never again fearing to proclaim His Lord.

5th Station of the Cross: Jesus is Judged by Pontius Pilate

*¹³ **Pilate** called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, ¹⁴ and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have **found no basis for your charges against him.** ¹⁵ Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, he has done nothing to deserve death. ¹⁶ Therefore, I will punish him and then release him."*

*¹⁸ But the whole crowd shouted, "Away with this man! Release Barabbas to us!" ¹⁹ (Barabbas had been thrown into prison for an insurrection in the city, and for murder.) ²⁰ Wanting to release Jesus, **Pilate appealed to them again.***

*²¹ But they kept shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" ²² For the **third time** he spoke to them: "Why? What crime has this man committed? **I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty.** Therefore I will have him punished and then release him."*

²³ But with loud shouts they insistently demanded that he be crucified, and their shouts prevailed. ²⁴ So Pilate decided to grant their demand. ²⁵ He released the man who had been thrown into prison for insurrection and murder, the one they asked for, and surrendered Jesus to their will. (Luke 23:13-25).

By today's legal standards, it is unlikely that Jesus would have been convicted in any court, especially since no real evidence against Him could be produced. Pontius Pilate could find no fault in anything Jesus had done and wanted to release Him, but the Sanhedrin demanded that Pilate order His execution. The Sanhedrin, who ruled according to strict Mosaic Law and tradition, considered Jesus a major threat to their ruling authority over the Jews. Jesus taught the people that salvation was by the grace of God and not by adherence to the many precepts set forth by the Sanhedrin, and such teaching not only undermined the authority of the religious leaders, but it also posed a serious threat to the livelihood that they enjoyed as a result of their control over the Jewish people. Even today, the message of salvation by the power and choice of God, not by our own efforts, is unpopular. Human beings in their fallen nature always want to achieve their own salvation, or at least have a part in it, so we can claim at least a part of the glory. But salvation is of the Lord, who shares His glory with no one (Isaiah 42:8).

6th Station of the Cross: Jesus is Scourged and Crowned With Thorns

⁶³ The men who were guarding Jesus began mocking and beating him. ⁶⁴ They blindfolded him and demanded, "Prophesy! Who hit you?" ⁶⁵ And they said many other insulting things to him. (Luke 22:63-65).

⁴ Once more Pilate came out and said to the Jews gathered there, "Look, I am bringing him out to you to let you know that I find no basis for a charge against him." ⁵ When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, "Here is the man!" ⁶ As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, "Crucify! Crucify!" But Pilate answered, "You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him." (John 19: 4-6).

The healing referred to in this passage is spiritual healing, or healing from sin. Pardon of sin, and restoration to the favor of God, are frequently represented as an act of healing. Over five hundred years before Mary gave birth to Jesus, Isaiah prophesied that Jesus would be wounded for our transgressions (Isaiah 53:3-6) and bruised for our inequities and that by His stripes we would be healed.

7th Station of the Cross: Jesus Takes up His Cross

¹⁷ Carrying his own cross, he went out to the place of the Skull (which in Aramaic is called Golgotha). (John 19:17).

When Jesus took up His cross, He was carrying more than wood. Unknown to the many spectators that day, Jesus was carrying the sins of mankind, facing the punishment those sins deserved, which He was about to suffer on man's behalf. Jesus exhorts us in Matthew 16:24, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." He also reveals that this is not an option: "...and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me (Matthew 10:38). Taking up our cross, an instrument of death, means dying to self in order to live as completely new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17) in service and obedience to Christ. This means surrendering to God our will, our affections, our ambitions, and our desires. We are not to seek our own happiness as the supreme object, but be willing to renounce all and lay down our lives also, if required.

March 14: Biblical Stations of the Cross, Part 1—Stations #8 to #14

8th Station of the Cross: Simon of Cyrene Helps Jesus Carry His Cross

²⁶ As the soldiers led him away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus. (Luke 23:26).

Simon of Cyrene might be considered a victim of circumstance. He had most likely come to Jerusalem for the Passover festivities and probably knew little about the proceedings at hand. We know very little about Simon of Cyrene since he is not mentioned in the Bible after he helped to carry the cross upon which Jesus would be nailed. Ordered to help by the Roman soldiers, Simon did not resist, most likely fearing for his own life in light of the situation at hand. Unlike Jesus, who carried His cross willingly, Simon of Cyrene was "compelled" or forced to carry it. As Christians, we are to join Jesus in His suffering willingly, as Paul exhorts us, *"So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God" (1 Timothy 1:8).*

9th Station of the Cross: Jesus Meets the Women of Jerusalem

²⁷ A large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. ²⁸ Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. ²⁹ For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' ³⁰ Then "they will say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!" ³¹ For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" (Luke 23:27-31).

When Jesus encountered the weeping women and some of His disciples on His way to crucifixion, He cautioned them that they should not weep for Him, but that their concerns should be for themselves and the lives of their children considering the rising evil throughout Jerusalem. Even while suffering great pain and personal humiliation, Jesus' concern was not for Himself, but for the lives and souls of those who faced the danger of eternal damnation because of the sin in their lives. The same caution is relevant for Christians today that we should be careful not to allow our concerns for this world to come before our devotion and obedience to God. Jesus said, *"My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36)*, and as citizens of heaven, our focus and attention should be there.

10th Station of the Cross: Jesus is Crucified

³³ When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified him there, along with the criminals—one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots. ³⁵ The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is God's Messiah, the Chosen One." ³⁶ The soldiers also came up and mocked him. They offered him wine vinegar ³⁷ and said, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself." ³⁸ There was a written notice above him, which read: THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS. ³⁹ One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: "Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" ⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." ⁴² Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." (Luke 23:33-42).

It is difficult, over two thousand years after the fact, to imagine the horror of the moment as those closest to Jesus were forced to helplessly stand by as the spikes were driven through His hands and feet into the timber on which

He would take His last breath in human form. His loved ones and disciples did not yet fully understand the meaning of what was taking place at the time. They were not yet able to understand that this evil deed of men was the result of divine purpose and planning for the salvation of all who would believe in the Christ. For us today, *"how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?"* (Hebrews 2:3). *"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved"* (Acts 4:12).

11th Station of the Cross: Jesus Promises His kingdom to the Believing Thief

⁴³ Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:43).

It is possible that the thief being crucified next to Jesus was able to grasp the concept that life was not ending for Jesus, but that He was transcending the physical world into eternal promise from which He came to provide for humanity. The thief would become one of the first to enter paradise by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9). Jesus told the thief that he would be in paradise that day with Him because he accepted and believed in the Son of God. Clearly, this is an example that a person is saved by grace through faith rather than by works, as those who persecuted and condemned Jesus would have the people believe.

12th Station of the Cross: Jesus on the Cross Speaks With His Mother and Disciples

²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, "Woman, here is your son," ²⁷ and to the disciple, "Here is your mother." From that time on, this disciple took her into his home. (John 19:26-27).

Jesus, in His dying moment, was still putting the needs of others before His own as He selflessly committed the care of His mother to His beloved disciple John. His entire life, including His death, taught by example that we are to put the needs of others before our own, subjecting everything to the perfect will of God. The willingness to abide by His Word and demonstrate with actions by faithfully sacrificing for others in the face of adversity, are defining characteristics of the true Christian life.

13th Station of the Cross: Jesus Dies on the Cross

⁴⁴ It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵ for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶ Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."^[c] When he had said this, he breathed his last. ⁴⁷ The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man." (Luke 23:44-47).

At the moment of Jesus' death, the curtain in the Temple, which separated men from the holy of holies, tore from top to bottom. This was terrifying for all the Jews who witnessed the event, who did not realize it signified the end to the Old Covenant and the beginning of the New Covenant. No longer would man have to suffer separation from God because of sin, but we would now be able to approach the throne of grace boldly in prayer for forgiveness of sins. The life and sacrificial death of Jesus had removed the barrier of sin, making it possible for man to obtain salvation by grace.

14th Station of the Cross: Jesus is Laid in the Tomb

*⁵⁰ Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, ⁵¹ who had not consented to their decision and action. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea, and he himself was waiting for the kingdom of God. ⁵² Going to Pilate, he **asked for Jesus' body**. ⁵³ Then he took it down, **wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb** cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid. ⁵⁴ It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin. (Luke 23:50-54).*

After Jesus died and was taken down from the cross, He was laid to rest in a tomb provided by a man named Joseph, from the Jewish town of Arimathea. Joseph happened to also be a member of the Sanhedrin, but was opposed to the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. Joseph secretly believed that Jesus was the Messiah according to Scripture, but feared the consequence of acknowledging his belief publicly (John 19:38). After Jesus died, Joseph went to Pilate secretly and requested the body of Jesus so that he might provide a proper burial.

Jesus' great sacrifice not only became the atonement for man's sins, but it also became the victory that would defeat and overcome death, which would have otherwise been the inescapable fate of all men who are born under the curse of sin. Sin carries its own inescapable penalty, and that penalty is death. Our Creator is just and fair and so demanded that the penalty for sin be paid. Because God is loving and merciful as well as just, He sent His only begotten Son to pay the penalty for our sins, knowing we were otherwise doomed for all eternity.

¹⁶ For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. ¹⁹ This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. (John 3:16).

God's love and mercy are greatly demonstrated by the words of Jesus as He hung dying on the cross when He asked God to forgive those who were killing Him in their ignorance (Luke 23:34). It is easy to surmise that man's unwillingness to fully surrender in obedience to God's Word and law is because of his lack of knowledge and wisdom. The irony of that summation is the fatality it produced for Jesus on the cross becomes spiritual fatality for those unable to overcome the same ignorance that still plagues much of humanity today. The sinful man who refuses to accept the gift of salvation that Jesus made possible by His sacrifice is surely the product of rebellious ignorance and sin that separates a man from the wisdom of God.



March 15: A Personal Reflection By Peg Bryner

**Am I Safe? How do I Learn? How do I Grow?
Whom and What do I trust? Can I step out of my Comfort Zone?**

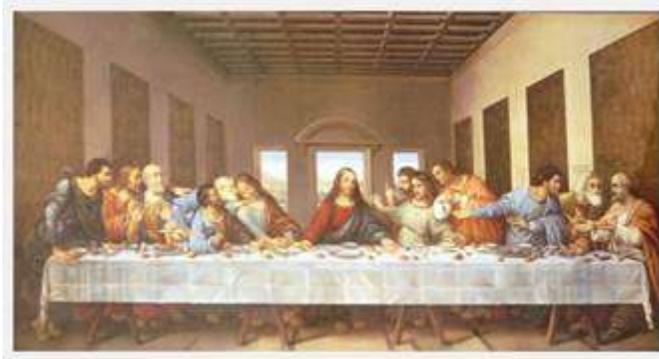
In the liturgical church year, we move from the anticipation and birth of the historical Jesus, and within four months, we revisit the last days leading up to crucifixion and resurrection. That period is a human experience of over thirty years reduced to our liturgical time period. However, in that thirty-some years, scriptures record many events, happenings, healings, teaching moments, compassion for the marginalized, not to mention the evolution of the disciples.

Just one example of one of those many stories/moments is the reading (in three of the four gospels) of the woman diseased for twelve years, who was healed while making her way through a crowd just to touch the garment of Jesus. By Jewish law and culture at that time, she would likely have been very isolated for those years. Such isolation can lead to lack of motivation and submission to being a recluse. So, what prompted her to search out this Jesus? How did she learn of him? How, after such isolation, did she find the courage to seek him out and trust that her life may be changed?

Most of us often feel these moments at times in our lives. How do we navigate to move forward for something different and meaningful to us? How do we move out of our comfort zone in realizing that perhaps we can reevaluate our indoctrination of ideas and beliefs, take the risk to step out, to perhaps learn or experience something new that leads us to further growth, deepen faith, further trust, welcome opportunities to love and to serve. Yes, it can be risky, feeling a bit unsafe and unsure, but unless we step into that space, we will never know, will we?



March 16: Last Supper & Jesus' Betrayal



Nissan 13 (Sunset Wednesday to Sunset Thursday) was 1st day of seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread.

- ⁷ Then came the day of Unleavened Bread on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. (Luke 22: 7)
- ¹⁷ On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, “Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?” (Math 26: 17-20)

Jesus sends Peter & John into Jerusalem to make preparations for Passover—The Last Supper.

- ⁸ Jesus sent Peter and John, ... (Luke 22:8)
- ... “Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. ¹⁴ Say to the owner of the house he enters, ‘The Teacher asks: Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’ ¹⁵ He will show you a large **upper room**, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.” (Mark14:13-16)

After sunset, Jesus and His twelve disciples assemble for Passover feast in Upper Room.

- ²⁰ When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. (Luke 22:1 26:20)
- ¹⁴ When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. ¹⁵ And he said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. ¹⁶ For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.” (Luke 22:14-16)

Dispute among disciples about who is greatest in the evening in the Upper Room.

- ²⁴ A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. (Luke 22:24)

Jesus washes the feet of disciples.

Commentary:

As guests and family members entered the home to celebrate Passover, a servant or slave would often be there to wash their feet. This was the task of the lowest class of people. That Jesus did this, even though he was head of the family, both symbolizes what he would later do for his disciples — “The Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give my life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45) and embodies His principle that “If anyone wants to be **first**, he shall be **last** of all, and servant of all” (Mark 9:35; John 13:15.)

Jesus identifies His betrayer.

*And while they were eating, he said, "Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me." ... ²³ Jesus replied, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. ²⁴ The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born." ²⁵ Then **Judas, the one who would betray him**, said, "Surely you don't mean me, Rabbi?" **(Math 26: 21-25)***

At the "Last Supper" Jesus institutes the **Lord's Supper** (i.e., **Communion**).

- ¹⁴ *When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. ¹⁵ And he said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. **(Luke 22: 14-15)***
- ²⁶ *While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "**Take and eat; this is my body.**" ²⁷ Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. ²⁸ **This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (Math 26: 26-29)***

Judas leaves to see Jewish religious leaders and agree to betray Jesus **(John 13:32)**

Judas Agrees to Betray Jesus

¹⁴ *Then one of the Twelve—the one called **Judas Iscariot**—went to the chief priests ¹⁵ and asked, "**What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?**" So they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver. ¹⁶ From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over. **(Math 26: 14-16)***

Jesus gives his disciples a new command—"Love One Another".

³³ *"My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. ³⁴ "**A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."** **(John 13: 31-35)***

Jesus predicts Peter will deny him 3 times before rooster crows.

- ³⁰ *"Truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "today—yes, tonight—before the rooster crows twice **you [Peter] yourself will disown me three times.**" **(Math 26: 31-35)***
- ³¹ *But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the others said the same. **(Luke 22:31-38)***

Jesus' discourse in Upper Room—promises Holy Spirit will come. This was final message to the eleven disciples.

²⁶ *But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. **(John 14: 26)***

Jesus and disciples sing a hymn. **(Math26:30)**

Jesus and disciples depart Upper Room and *"... went out to the Mount of Olives."*

Jesus crossed the Kidron Valley and went up the southwestern slope to an olive grove in **Garden of Gethsemane** with His disciples. The Mount of Olives was located just to the east of Jerusalem. **(Math 26:30; Mark 14:26)**

On way to Gethsemane Jesus tells the parable of the vine and branches..

*"**I am the true vine**, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes^[a] so that it will be even more fruitful. ...no branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. ⁵ "**I am the vine; you are the branches.***

If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (John 15: 1 – 8)

Jesus prays to be glorified.

*... Jesus ... looked toward heaven and prayed: "Father, the hour has come. **Glorify your Son**, that your Son may glorify you... he knows you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. ⁴ **I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do.** ⁵ And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began. (John 17: 1-5)*

Jesus prays for His disciples.

*... ⁸ For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. ⁹ **I pray for them...** ¹¹ I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, **protect them** by the power of ¹² your name, the name you gave me ... I protected them and kept them safe ... None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled. ¹³ "I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, ... ¹⁴ I have given them your word and the world has hated them ... ¹⁵ **My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one.** (John 17: 8-15)*

Jesus prays for all believers.

*... I pray also for **those who will believe in me** ... ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— ²³ I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17: 21-23)*

Jesus goes off to pray by himself three times in Gethsemane.

"... he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. ³⁴ "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," (Mark 14:33-35)

*"Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. **Take this cup from me.** Yet not what I will, but what you will." (Luke 22:42)*

⁴⁰ Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. ⁴¹ "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." ⁴² He went away a second time and prayed, (Math 26:40-42)

*⁴⁴ So he left them and went away once more and **prayed the third time**, saying the same thing. ⁴⁵ Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. ⁴⁶ Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!" (Math 26:44-46)*

Jesus agonized "**sweat like drops of blood**" (Luke 22: 44)

Commentary:

*The sweating of blood is an actual medical condition called **hematidrosis**. It is not very common but is associated with high degree of psychological stress. Severe anxiety causes the release of chemicals that break down the capillaries in the sweat glands. These results in a small amount of bleeding into these glands, and the sweat comes out ringed with blood. The amount of blood is small! Consequently, Jesus' skin would have been extremely fragile when flogged.*

Jesus betrayed and arrested, late at night, by the temple authorities who were led by Judas.

³ So Judas came to the grove, guiding a detachment of soldiers—not Roman soldiers but from the temple who were controlled by the Jewish high priest—and some officials from the chief priest and Pharisees. (John 18: 2-12)

Commentary: The Jewish religious leaders had not arrested Jesus in the temple during the day for fear of a riots.

Judas identifies Jesus by kissing him.

⁴⁵ Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, “Rabbi!” and **kissed him**. (Mark 14: 45)

Commentary: A kiss was and still is the traditional greeting among men in certain parts of the world.

¹⁰ Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest’s servant, cutting off his right ear. (John 18:10) The servant’s name was Malchus.

⁴⁹ When Jesus’ followers saw what was going to happen, they said, “Lord, should we strike with our swords?” ⁵⁰ And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear. ⁵¹ But Jesus answered, “No more of this!” And he touched the man’s ear and healed him. (Luke 22:49-51)

“ ... Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.” (Luke 26: 56)

“ ... They bound him [Jesus] ¹³ and brought him first to Annas ...” (John 18: 3)

A young man, who had followed Jesus, flees naked. (Mark 14: 51)

Commentary: Young man who fled naked is believed to be Mark.

Spiritual Nugget #11

There is a difference between knowing Jesus verses knowing about Jesus!

March 17: Jesus' Trial— Hearings #1 to #5

Jesus' trial was actually a series of hearings and interrogations, carefully controlled to accomplish the death of Jesus. The verdict was predetermined but certain procedures needed to be followed to give the perception that Jesus's conviction was "legal" according to Jewish law.

Also, the title of "High Priest" was considered a life time title. This helps explain that while the Romans replaced the high priest Annas with his son-in-law Caiaphas, Annas still had power and respect among the Jews.

Yet despite the concern of the religious leaders that the trial be perceived as "legal", several aspects clearly violated Jewish law. Consider the following examples:

- Takes place at night.
- Jesus asked to incriminate himself without a lawyer.
- Annas had no authority to pass sentence. Jewish religious law required each member of the Sanhedrin to cast a vote when passing sentence. There is no vote for Jesus. The sentence was passed by simple consensus.
- It was very unusual to bring a prisoner to the personal residence of the high priest instead of a prison cell at the Roman barracks.
- The law required a person arrested to be taken to the Temple Courts.

Hearing #1 Before Ex-High Priest Anna, The Father-in-law of Caiaphas

- Occurred at night in courtyard
- *"... one of the officials nearby struck him in the face..." (John 18:22)*
- *Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest. (John 18:24)*

Hearing #2 Before High Priest Caiaphas

- To gather evidence for the full council hearing of the Sanhedrin.

Hearing #3 Before Full Sanhedrin—the Governing Body of the Jewish Nation.

- *⁶⁶ At daybreak the **council of the elders** of the people, both the chief priests and the teachers of the law, met together, and Jesus was led before them. (Luke 22:66)*
- *⁵⁵ ... **whole Sanhedrin** were looking for evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death, but they did not find any. ⁵⁶ **Many testified falsely** against him, but their statements did not agree. (Mark 55-56)*
- *⁵⁷ Then some stood up and gave this false testimony against him: ⁵⁸ "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this man-made temple and in three days will build another, not made by man.'" ⁵⁹ Yet even then their testimony did not agree. (Mark 14:57-58)*
- *"... the **high priest** asked him, "Are you the Christ,^[a] the Son of the Blessed One?" ⁶² "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." ⁶³ The high priest tore his clothes. "Why do we need any more witnesses?" he asked. ⁶⁴ "You have heard the **blasphemy** ... What do you think?" (Mark 14:61-64)*

Commentary: They all condemned him as worthy of death. Blasphemy, the sin of claiming to be God or of attacking God's authority in any way was punishable by death under Jewish law—but not Roman law. Also, only the Romans could execute someone. Therefore the Jewish leaders had to convince the Roman Governor to execute Jesus. They had to come up with a crime punishable under Roman Law.

- *⁶⁵ Then some began to spit at him; they blindfolded him, struck him with their fists, and said, "Prophecy!" And the guards took him and beat him. (Mark 14:65)*
- *¹ Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, reached a decision to formally condemn Jesus. (Mark 15:1)*

- Sent to Pilate because Sanhedrin accused Jesus of treason and only Rome could grant death penalty. **(Matthew 27:1, Luke 22:66-71)**
- ² *And they [Sanhedrin] began to accuse him, saying, “We have found this man subverting our nation. He opposes payment of taxes to Caesar and claims to be Christ, a king.”* **(Luke 23:2)**
- **Peter denies Jesus 3 times** while in courtyard standing around fire.
Commentary: Even though the arrest and interrogations were taking place at night, news spread and people started to gather around the court yard. **(Math 26: 58, 69-75, Mark 14: 54, 66-72, Luke 22: 54-62, John 18: 15-18)**
- After Jesus condemned, Judas returns money and hangs himself. ⁵ *So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself.* **(Math 27:5)**
- *“It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money.”* ⁷ *So they decided to use the money to buy the **potter’s field** as a burial place for foreigners.* **(Math 27:6-7)**
- *Very early in the morning, the chief priests, with the elders, the teachers of the law and the whole Sanhedrin, made their plans. So they **bound Jesus**, led him away and **handed him over to Pilate.*** **(Mark 15:1)**

Commentary on Temple Hierarchy:

- Caiaphas was a member of the Sadducee sect and high priest at the time of Jesus. His father-in-law, Annas, had been high priest before him. Caiaphas controlled the massive temple treasury and all the thousands of people who worked in the temple—the priests, the guards, the choirs and musicians, the teachers, and the many workers.
- The **Sadducees** were aristocratic priests, many from families of priests. They were less rigid in interpreting the law and more willing to live in harmony with the pagan Romans. The Sadducees were very involved with the rituals at the temple. They cared appearances and were literal followers of the customs set down in the Torah.
- The **Pharisees** were common people and were respected because they specialized in interpreting the oral laws God gave Moses. The Mosaic Law and the Torah—the written scripture—formed the basis of Jewish religious and legal custom. It was the Pharisees who interpreted Mosaic Law and wrote their ideas down in the Talmud. The Pharisees believed that a Messiah would come and bring with him an era of world peace. Nicodemus was a Pharisee.
- Members of both the Pharisees and Sadducees made up the **Sanhedrin**—the seventy-one member high court or ruling council—that was responsible for running the temple, collecting taxes, and interpreting religious and civil laws.

Hearing #4 Before Pilate, Roman Governor of Judea —The 1st Time

- Jesus was brought before him at the 3rd hour (i.e., 9:00 am)
- Caiaphas asks Pilate to come to the gate of his palace since entering the Roman court yard would make the Jewish religious “unclean” for Passover. (Math 27: 2, 11-14; Luke 23: 1-7; John 18: 39-40)
- ² *“**Are you the king of the Jews?**” asked Pilate. “**Yes, it is as you say,**” Jesus replied. ³ *The chief priests accused him of many things. ⁴ So again Pilate asked him, “Aren’t you going to answer? See how many things they are accusing you of.” ⁵ But Jesus still made no reply, and Pilate was amazed.* **(Mark 15:2-5)***
- ⁴ *Then Pilate announced to the chief priests and the crowd, “**I find no basis for a charge against this man.**”* **(Luke 23:4)**
- ⁵ *But they insisted, “He stirs up the people all over Judea^[b] by his teaching. He started in Galilee and has come all the way here.” ⁶ On hearing this, Pilate asked if the man was a Galilean. ⁷ **When he learned that Jesus was under Herod’s jurisdiction, he sent him to Herod,** who was also in Jerusalem at that time. **(Luke 23:5-7)***

- Pilate cannot find a reason to charge Jesus and tries to get himself out of what he perceives as a Jewish political and religious squabble by sending Jesus to Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee after he discovers Jesus is from Galilee.
- However, when Jesus answered “yes” to Pilate’s question “Are you the Kings of the Jews?” Jesus technically committed a crime under Roman law and can be viewed as a threat to the public order.

Hearing #5 Before Herod Antipas, Tetrarch (i.e., Ruler) of Galilee

- Herod was in Jerusalem for Passover.
- Jesus was born in Galilee
- Tetrarch is a subordinate ruler in the Roman Empire. The term refers to “fourths” and the fact the Herod the Great’s kingdom of Judea was split into four unequal parts after his death. One part to son Herod, one part to son Philip and two parts to son Archelaus. Upon exile of Archelaus in A.D. 6, Rome sent prefects to be governors to oversee the Judea.
- This was same Herod who had killed John the Baptist.
- Herod’s palace was only a few blocks away from where Pilate was staying.
- Jesus taken to Herod’s palace early in morning (**John 18:28**)
- Herod meets Jesus outside; brings him inside for questioning
- ⁸ When Herod saw Jesus, he was greatly pleased, because for a long time he had been wanting to see him ... he hoped to see him perform a sign of some sort. ⁹ He plied him with many questions, but Jesus gave him no answer. ¹⁰ The chief priests and the teachers of the law were standing there, vehemently accusing him. ¹¹ Then Herod and his soldiers ridiculed and mocked him. Dressing him in an elegant robe, (**Luke 23:8-11**)
- Soldiers put a purple robe on Jesus; purple is the color of kings.
- Herod still haunted by the beheading of John the Baptist
- ¹¹ ... they sent him back to Pilate. ¹² That day Herod and Pilate became friends—before this they had been enemies. (**Luke 23:11**)

March 18: Jesus' Trial, Hearing #6—Before Pilate The 2nd Time

- When Jesus appeared before Pilate the second time, Pilate who after offering the crowd the choice of Barabbas or Jesus, condemned Jesus, had him flogged and then handed him over to Jews around 6th hour (noon) to be crucified. (**Math 27: 15-23; Mark 15: 6-14; Luke 23: 13-22; John 18: 39-40**)
- The **Roman Flogging** was essentially brutal torture. A typical flogging consisted of 39 lashes covering the body from shoulders to buttocks. A Roman soldier would use a whip of braided leather thongs with metal balls woven into them. When striking the flesh, the balls would cause deep bruises or contusions, which would break open with further blows. The whip also had share bone which would cut the flesh severely. The spine would often be so shredded that part of the spine was sometimes exposed by deep cuts.
- As the flogging progressed, lacerations would tear into the underlying skeletal muscles and produce quivering ribbons of flesh. A 3rd century historian Eusebius described a flogging by saying "The sufferer's veins were laid bare, and the very muscles, sinews, and bowels of the victim were open to exposure."
- Many people died from the flogging even before they were crucified. At a minimum, the victim would experience horrendous pain and go into **hypovolemic shock**—which means suffering the effects of losing a large amount of blood. This results in:
 - The heart rate races to try to pump blood that isn't there.
 - The blood pressure drops, causing fainting or collapse.
 - The kidneys stop producing urine to maintain what volume is left.
 - The victim becomes thirsty as the body craves fluids to replace the lost blood volume.
- The Gospels contain evidence of these physical impacts on Jesus body:

*¹⁶ The soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium) and called together the whole company of soldiers. ¹⁷ They put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. ¹⁸ And they began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" ¹⁹ Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. ²⁰ And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. **Then they led him out to crucify him.** ²¹ **A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross.** (**Mark 15:16-21**)*

The Death of Jesus. ²⁸ Later, knowing that everything had now been finished, and so that Scripture would be fulfilled, **Jesus said, "I am thirsty."** ²⁹ A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips. ³⁰ When he had received the drink, Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit. (**John 19:28-30**)

- ¹³ Pilate called together the chief priests, the rulers and the people, ¹⁴ and said to them, "You brought me this man as one who was inciting the people to rebellion. I have examined him in your presence and have **found no basis for your charges** against him. ¹⁵ Neither has Herod, for he sent him back to us; as you can see, **he has done nothing to deserve death.** ¹⁶ Therefore, I will punish him and then release him." (**Luke 23: 13-16**)
- ²² For the third time he spoke to them: "Why? What crime has this man committed? **I have found in him no grounds for the death penalty** (**Luke 23: 22**)
- ¹² ... Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jewish leaders kept shouting, "If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar." (**John 19:12**)
- Three separate times Pilate declared Jesus innocent. Pilate doesn't believe executing such a popular figure as Jesus is a wise decision and he worries it might cause unrest that would be reported to the Roman Emperor Tiberius. But he also fears that the Jewish religious leaders might inform Tiberius that he had not eliminated a rebel against Rome which caused him to go along with Jewish leaders.

- Pilate could not order the Jewish leaders to release Jesus for that would be considered interfering with the Jewish law. The Roman Emperor Tiberius had made it clear the Roman Governor could not interfere. Tiberius supposedly admired the Jews' religious ways and considered the Jews the most devout subjects in his empire. Also, apparently the historical records show that Pilate had already been warned by Roman authorities about tensions in the region and that Tiberius had sent orders to Pilate saying "Change nothing already sanctioned by custom, but to regard as a sacred trust both the Jews themselves and their laws, which are conducive to public order."
- ⁶ Now it was the custom at the Feast to release a prisoner whom the people requested. ⁷ A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. ⁸ The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did. ⁹ "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate, ¹⁰ knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. **(Mark 15:6-10)**
- Pilate's wife has dream & warns Pilate not to harm Jesus. **(Math 27:19-20)**
- ¹¹ But the **chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas** instead. ¹² "What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them. ¹³ "Crucify him!" they shouted. ¹⁴ "Why? What crime has he committed?" asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, "Crucify him!" ¹⁵ Wanting to satisfy the crowd, Pilate released Barabbas to them. **(Mark 15:11-15)**
- Pilate consents to Jesus death. **(Math 27: 22-26; Luke 23: 20-25; John 19: 4-16)**
- ¹⁶ The Roman soldiers led Jesus away into the palace (that is, the Praetorium). **(Mark 15:16)**
- The soldiers mock Jesus. "... soldiers ... called together the whole company of soldiers. ¹⁷ ... put a purple robe on him, then twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on him. ¹⁸ ... began to call out to him, "Hail, king of the Jews!" ¹⁹ Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him. ²⁰ And when they had mocked him, they took off the purple robe and put his own clothes on him. ... **(Mark 15:16-20)**
- ²¹ A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross. ²² They brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means "the place of the skull"). **(Mark 15: 21-22)**
- Jesus lead out to be crucified at Calvary. A Roman crucifixion death squad consisted of four men (quaternion) and one centurion who oversees the actions.

March 19: Refuting Arguments That Jesus Did Not Die

The purpose of this *Reflection* is to refute five common arguments proposed by those who deny Jesus actually died and arose again:

- 1. Jesus was only unconscious and later revived.**
- 2. The women made a mistake and went to the wrong tomb.**
- 3. Unknown thieves stole Jesus' body.**
- 4. The disciples stole Jesus' body.**
- 5. The religious leaders stole Jesus' body to produce it later.**

Why does it matter? Isn't the resurrection the key to the Christian faith!

- Jesus rose from the dead as he said that he would. We can therefore be confident that he will accomplish everything else that he promised.
- Jesus' bodily resurrection shows us that the living Christ, not a false prophet, is ruler of God's eternal kingdom.
- We can be certain of our own resurrection because Jesus was resurrected. Death is not the end—there is a future, eternal life.
- The divine power that brought Jesus back to life is not available to us to bring our spiritually dead selves back to life.
- The resurrection is the basis for the church's witness to the world.

As an eyewitness of Christ, Paul made it abundantly clear that **without the resurrection, there is no basis for faith in Christ. In fact, if Christ did not arise, then isn't Christianity a farce and simply one of the many "feel good, do good" philosophies for living as Paul clearly taught in his letter to the Corinthians? Christianity loses its uniqueness!**

*Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there be **no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen?** And if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and **your faith is also vain?***

[1 Corinthians 15:12-29]

The following scriptural evidence demonstrates **Jesus' uniqueness in history** and proves he was the Son of God. Was any other spiritual leader in world history able to predict their own resurrection and then accomplish it?

1. Proposed Explanation: Jesus was only unconscious and later revived.

Refuting Explanation:

- A Roman soldier told Pilate that Jesus was dead.

*⁴² It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached, ⁴³ Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. ⁴⁴ Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. **Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died.** ⁴⁵ When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. (Mark 15:42-45)*

Context Commentary: The Sabbath began at sundown on Friday and ended at sundown on Saturday. Jesus died just a few hours before sundown on Friday. It was against Jewish law to do physical work or to travel on the Sabbath. It was also against Jewish law to let a dead body remain exposed overnight ([Deuteronomy 21:23](#)).

Although Joseph was a honored member of the Sanhedrin, he was a secret disciple of Jesus. Not all the religious leaders hated Jesus. Joseph risked his reputation to give a proper burial to his Lord. In the past, Joseph had been afraid to speak against the religious leaders who opposed Jesus; now he was bold, courageously asking to take Jesus' body from the cross and bury it before the Sabbath began. The disciples who publicly followed Jesus fled, but this Jewish leader, who followed Jesus in secret, came forward and did what was right.

If Jesus had died on the Sabbath when Joseph was unavailable, his body would have been taken down by the Romans. Had the Romans taken Jesus' body, no Jews could have confirmed his death, and opponents could have disputed the resurrection.

- The Roman soldiers did not break Jesus' legs because he had already died, and one of them pierced Jesus' side with a spear.

*³¹ Now it was the day of Preparation, and the next day was to be a special Sabbath. Because the Jews did not want the bodies left on the crosses during the Sabbath, they asked Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies taken down. ³² The soldiers therefore came and broke the legs of the first man who had been crucified with Jesus, and then those of the other. ³³ But when they **came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs.** ³⁴ Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. (John 19:31-34)*

Context Commentary: The Roman soldiers knew from previous crucifixions whether a man was dead or alive. There is no question that Jesus was dead when they checked him, so they decided not to break legs as they had done to the other victims.

Roman soldiers would break the victim's legs to hasten the death process. When a person hung on a cross, death came by suffocation, but the victim could push against the cross with legs to hold up his body and keep breathing. With broken legs, he would suffocate almost immediately.

Piercing his side and seeing the sudden flow of blood and water (indicating the sac surrounding the heart and the heart itself had been pierced) was further proof of his death. Some people say that Jesus didn't really die, that he only passed out and that is how he came back to life. But we have the witness of an impartial party, the Roman soldiers, that Jesus died on the cross.

- Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus wrapped Jesus' body and placed it in the tomb.

*³⁸ Later, **Joseph of Arimathea** asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. ³⁹ He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. **Nicodemus** brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. ⁴⁰ **Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen.** This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. (John 19:38-40)*

Context Commentary: Joseph and Nicodemus were secret followers of Jesus. They were afraid to make this allegiance known because of their positions in the Jewish community. Joseph was also a leader and honored member of the Jewish council. Nicodemus, also a member of the council, had come to Jesus by night (John 3:1) and later tried to defend him before the other religious leaders (John 7:50-52). Yet they both risked their reputations to provide for Jesus' burial.

2. Proposed Explanation: The women made a mistake going to the wrong tomb. Refuting Explanation:

- **Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw Jesus placed in the tomb.**

⁵⁹ Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, ⁶⁰ and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. ⁶¹ Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb. (Mathew 27:59-61)

Context Commentary: The tomb was probably a man-made cave cut out of one of the many limestone hills in the area. These caves were often large enough to walk into.

⁴⁶ So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. ⁴⁷ Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where he was laid. (Mark 15:46-47)

Context Commentary: These women could do very little. They couldn't speak before the Sanhedrin in Jesus' defense; they couldn't appeal to Pilate; they couldn't stand against the crowds; they couldn't overpower the Roman guards. But they did what they could. They stayed at the cross when the disciples had fled; they followed Jesus' body to its tomb. And they prepared spices for his body.

⁵³ Then he [Joseph] took it down, wrapped it in linen cloth and placed it in a tomb cut in the rock, one in which no one had yet been laid. ⁵⁴ It was Preparation Day, and the Sabbath was about to begin.

⁵⁵ The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. ⁵⁶ Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment. (Luke 23:55)

Context Commentary: The Galilean women followed Joseph to the tomb, so they knew exactly where to find Jesus' body when they returned after the Sabbath with their spices and perfumes. They stayed at the cross when most of the disciples had fled. Because of their devotion, they were the first to know about the resurrection. As believers, we may feel that we can't do much for Jesus. But we are called to take advantage of the opportunities given us—doing what we can do and not worrying about what we cannot do.

¹ When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. ² Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb ³ and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" (Mark 16:1-3)

Context Commentary: The women purchased the spices on Saturday evening after the Sabbath had ended so they could go to the tomb early the next morning and anoint Jesus' body as a sign of love, devotion, and respect. Bringing spices to the tomb was like bringing flowers to a grave today.

- **On Sunday morning, Peter and John also went to the same tomb.**

*³ So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. ⁴ Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He **saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷ as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head.** The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. ⁸ Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹ (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) (John 20: 3-9)*

Context Commentary: The grave clothes were left as if Jesus had passed right through them. The headpiece was still rolled up in the shape of a head, and it was at about the right distance from the wrappings that and enveloped Jesus' body. A grave robber couldn't possibly have made off with Jesus' body and left the linens as if they were still shaped around it.

As further proof that the disciples did not fabricate this story, we find Peter and John were surprised that Jesus was not in the tomb. When John saw the grave clothes looking like an empty cocoon from which Jesus emerged, he believed that Jesus had risen. It wasn't until after they had seen the empty tomb that they remembered what the Scriptures and Jesus had said—he would die, but he would also rise again.

3. Proposed Explanation: Unknown thieves stole Jesus' body. Refuting Explanation:

- **The tomb was sealed and guarded by Roman soldiers.**

*⁶² The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the **chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate.** ⁶³ "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' ⁶⁴ So **give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day.** Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first." ⁶⁵ "Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." ⁶⁶ So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard. (Mathew 27:62-66)*

Context Commentary: The Jewish religious leaders took Jesus' resurrection claims more seriously than the disciples did. The disciples didn't remember Jesus' teaching about his resurrection (Mathew 20:17-19); but the religious leaders did. Because of his claims, they were almost as afraid of Jesus after his death as when he was alive. They tried to take every precaution that his body would remain in the tomb.

They made sure his tomb was thoroughly sealed and guarded. Because the tomb was hewn out of rock in the side of a hill, there was only one entrance. The tomb was sealed by string a cord across the stone that was rolled over the entrance. The cord was sealed at each end with clay. But the religious leaders took added precautions, asking that guards be placed at the tomb's entrance. With such precautions, the only way the tomb could be empty would be for Jesus to rise from the dead. The Pharisees failed to understand that no rock, deal, guard, or army could prevent the Son of God from rising again.

4. Proposed Explanation: The disciples stole Jesus' body. Refuting Explanation:

- **The disciples were ready to die for their faith. Stealing Jesus' body would have been admitting that their faith was meaningless.**

¹ It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. ² He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. ³ When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread. ⁴ After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. (Acts 12:1-3)

Context Commentary: This king Herod was Herod Agrippa I, the son of Aristobulus and grandson of Herod the Great. His sister was Herodias, who was responsible for the death of John the Baptist (see [Mark 6:17-28](#)). Herod Agrippa I was partly Jewish. The Romans had appointed him to rule over most of Palestine, including the territories of Galilee, Perea, Judea, and Samaria. He persecuted the Christians in order to please the Jewish leaders who opposed them, hoping that would solidify his position. Agrippa 1 died suddenly in A.D. 44. His death was also recorded by the historian Josephus.

James and John were two of the original 12 apostles who followed Jesus. They had asked Jesus for special recognition in his kingdom ([Mark 10:35-40](#)). Jesus said that to be a part of his kingdom would mean suffering with Jesus (i.e., drink from the same cup—[Mark 10:38-39](#)). James and John did indeed suffer—Herod executed James and later John was exiled.

Why did God allow James to die and yet miraculously save Peter? Life is full of difficult questions like this. Why is one child physically disabled and another child athletically gifted? Why do people die seemingly before realizing their potential? These are questions we cannot possibly answer in this life because we do not see all that God sees. He has chosen to allow evil in this world for a time. But we can trust God's leading because he has promised to destroy all evil eventually.

Peter was arrested during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the week-long festival directly following Passover. This was a strategic move, since more Jews were in the city than usual, and Herod could impress the most people. Herod planned undoubtedly to execute Peter, but the believers were praying for Peter's safety.

- **The tomb was guarded and sealed.**

The Guard at the Tomb

⁶² The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. ⁶³ "Sir," they said, "we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I will rise again.' ⁶⁴ So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first."

⁶⁵ "Take a guard," Pilate answered. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how." ⁶⁶ So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard. ([Mathew 27:62-66](#))

Context Commentary: The Jewish religious leaders took Jesus' resurrection claims more seriously than the disciples did. The disciples didn't remember Jesus' teachings about his resurrection ([Matthew 20:17-19](#)); but the religious leaders did. Because of his claims, they were almost as afraid of Jesus after his death as when he was alive. They tried to take every precaution that his body would remain in the tomb.

The Pharisees were so afraid of Jesus' predictions about his resurrection that they made sure the tomb was thoroughly sealed and guarded. Because the tomb was hewn out of rock in the side of a hill, there was only one entrance. The tomb was sealed by stringing a cord across the stone that was rolled over the entrance. The cord was sealed at each end with clay. But the religious leaders took a further precaution, asking that guards be placed at the tomb's entrance. With such precautions, the only way the tomb could be empty would be for Jesus to rise from the dead. The Pharisee failed to understand that no rock, seal, guard or army could prevent the Son of God from rising again.

5. Proposed Explanation: The religious leaders stole Jesus' body to produce it later. Refuting Explanation:

If the religious leaders had taken Jesus' body, they would have produced it to stop the rumors of his resurrection.

March 20: Attending Worship Can Improve Physical & Mental Health

*“People who attend worship services regularly
tend to have more close friendships,
which can in turn lead to better health outcomes.” [1]*

Most health care professionals recognize that they can't fully assess patients' health without looking at social determinants—the nonmedical factors that influence health outcomes. Factors such as income, housing, quality of schools, access to fresh produce etc... play an important role in wellness. But there's one important factor that is often not fully acknowledged—the **role of faith**.

Faith, spirituality and a sense of purpose all have a beneficial effect on one's emotional, physical and mental health. In fact, this connection has been well-established by researchers. Belief in a divine plan for one's life can foster optimism and hope—attitudes that can in turn boost both mental and physical health, according to an analysis of over 40 studies [2].

In addition, spiritual practices, such as prayer, can also reduce stress and anxiety [3]. Spirituality and faith can even affect our physical health. According to a study published in the Journal of Health Psychology, religiosity, spirituality and frequency of prayer have been linked to lower cortisol levels.

Religious Observance Can Boost Immune System. In a study of more than 1,700 older adults, researchers at Duke University Medical Center found that those who practice religion had better immune function than those who didn't [5]. The findings persisted even when researchers adjusted for other factors that could impact immune system function, such as depression or chronic illness. The researchers suggest that the shared promotion of positive thoughts or experience of worship and adoration may help explain the physical health benefits.

Here's how physicians at the Mayo Clinic sum up research on the topic:

*“Most studies have shown that religious involvement and spirituality
are associated with better health outcomes,
including greater longevity, coping skills, and health-related quality of life
(even during terminal illness) and less depression, and suicide.”*

It has also been shown that some health benefits can be more pronounced in organized religion than simply in belief itself. For example, **if you're a member of a house of worship**, you've likely noticed that few people attend services alone. Just as important as the internal attitudes religion can foster are the social connections it can bring.

An epidemic of loneliness and a lack of community have contributed to a rapid rise in “deaths of despair” from suicide and substance abuse in today's society. However, belonging to a faith organization can foster the sense of community that's missing in so many people's lives.

Friendships and social support can lead to better health. People who attend services regularly tend to have more close friendships, which can in turn lead to better health outcomes. One study found that cancer **patients who belonged to a church choir** reported better vitality and mental health despite no changes in their physical condition. Those simply having social support and coming together to sing was enough to improve their sense of well-being.

Harvard researchers have also found that men and women who **attend services weekly** reduce their risk of dying a death of despair by 33% and 68%, respectively. This social aspect can apply some positive peer pressure as well. Many healthy behaviors are what psychologists call “*socially contagious*.” For example, a recent study found that Black Americans who were more involved with their house of worship had better cardiovascular health partly because their community helped them make lifestyle changes, such as quitting smoking or eating healthier. It's easier to reach your health goals when someone else encourages you and holds you accountable.

However, despite the proven health benefits, **religious affiliation is on the decline** in America. In fact, the fastest-growing religious segment of the U.S. population is now the "nones" – those who profess no religious affiliation.

In recent years, many Christian churches and leaders no longer identify with the religion. Instead, they identify as spiritual leaders with a 'spiritual collective' group instead of a religious group. Most people refer to them as the "Church for Nones." In a recent survey by Pew Research, about 22% of Americans now identify as "**spiritual but not religious**." This shows that many people are migrating to a more spiritual path, which they believe is better for them.

These spiritual organizations referred to as "Church of Nones" typically do not follow a definite doctrine and allow their members much flexibility. Following are three examples:

- *Vinings Lake in Atlanta*. The community no longer considers itself a church and now identifies as a more fluid group. Their Pastor, Cody Deese, said, "*We're an ever-evolving spiritual collective. If you're a Christian, wonderful. If you're post-Christian, wonderful.*" At first sight, it seems like a regular church, especially during their Sunday morning gatherings. They also use music, teachings, and fellowship to connect with their members. However, they reject blind faith; they also allow their members to believe in anything and nothing simultaneously.
- *Heartway*. Here, their Pastor, Danny Prada, used to be an active preacher of Christianity but struggled with some parts of his faith. "*Everything started to unravel for me rather quickly. The challenge of that was still going up and preaching a sermon every Sunday, when on the inside, I was doubting the legitimacy of the whole thing,*" Prada said in an interview. Later, he shared his doubts with the congregation but got a lot of backlash, as expected. However, many others agreed with him and his newfound beliefs. Therefore, in 2019, Heartway rebranded as a spiritual community. Prada said, "*The focus is less on beliefs and dogma, whether conservative or progressive and more about the experience, the practical spirituality.*"
- *Aldea*. The spiritual community claims it is bound by values, not written texts or beliefs. The group pastor, Jake Haber, said, "*Our motto is love, period. We determine what these wisdom texts are saying through the lens of love, rather than determining what love means through the lens of a wisdom text.*"

Many of the members of these communities have experienced one form of religious trauma or the other. Therefore, these people no longer feel like they belong in traditional churches. The "Church for Nones" concept gives them a fresh approach to spirituality and helps them "belong" in a new community. Since the doctrines are not set in stone, there are still a lot of experimental parts of the church. Their leaders believe they are all figuring it out together and will continue to do so for as long as possible. Furthermore, they **want a place where everyone is welcome and no one feels left out**.

Finally, it's important to note that a decline of religion and spirituality seem to be associated with potentially negative health effects. While you don't have to join your nearest house of worship to enjoy good health, there are scientific studies that have shown that **your health is as much a matter of the soul as of the body**. If you already have a faith, cultivate and nurture it! If you don't, perhaps consider seeking out places or situations that bring you a sense of connection and hope through meaningful relationships.

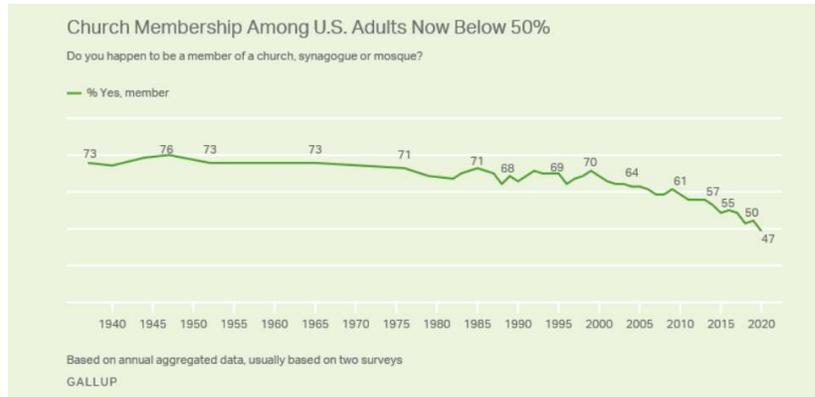
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1. McGraw, Dr. Phil and Whyte, Dr. John. "*Living on a prayer? How attending worship can improve your physical and mental health*", Abilene Reporter, July 9, 2023, internet.
2. "*Optimism and Its Impact on Mental and Physical Well-Being*," NIH Library of Medicine website.
3. "*Unpacking the Relationship Between Prayer and Anxiety: A Consideration of Prayer Types and Expectations in the United States*," NIH Library of Medicine website.
4. "*Exploring Heart and Soul: Effects of Religiosity/Spirituality and Gender on Blood Pressure and Cortisol Stress Responses*," Vol 10, Issue 6, Dec 2005, website.
5. "*Attending Religious Service May Improve Immune Status*," October 22, 1997, DUKEHealth website

MARCH 21: Trends in Religious Affiliation

While the primary focus of a Lenten Reflections is to nurture and assist “believers in Jesus Christ” to reflect on their spiritual journey, perhaps it would be also worthwhile to spend one of the days in Lent to reflect on several major trends regarding the “church”. Therefore, this reflection looks at some of the broad trends regarding religious affiliation and attendance, as well as the growth of the “nones” previously mentioned in another reflection. Note that space does not allow for sharing in-depth, detailed analysis.

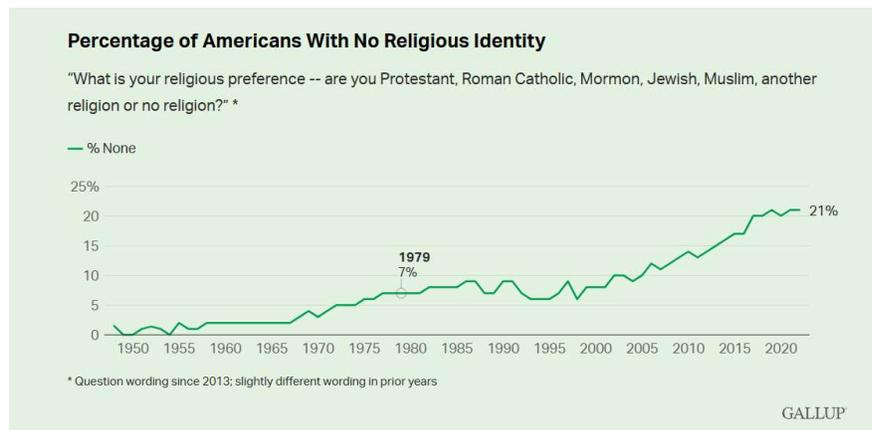
Decline of Church Membership Among Adults. The drop in church membership has been well documented but the following charts helps us better appreciate the significant decline in the U.S. Membership in houses of worship continues to decline dropping below 50% for the first time in Gallup's eight-decade trend. In 2020, 47% of Americans stated they belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque, down from 50% in 2018 and 70% in 1999.



JONES, JEFFREY M. “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority For First Time”, Politics, March 29, 2021, Gallup Website.

Consider that U.S. church membership was 73% when Gallup first measured it in 1937 and remained near 70% for the following six decades. But note the steady decline in church membership since the turn of the 21 century.

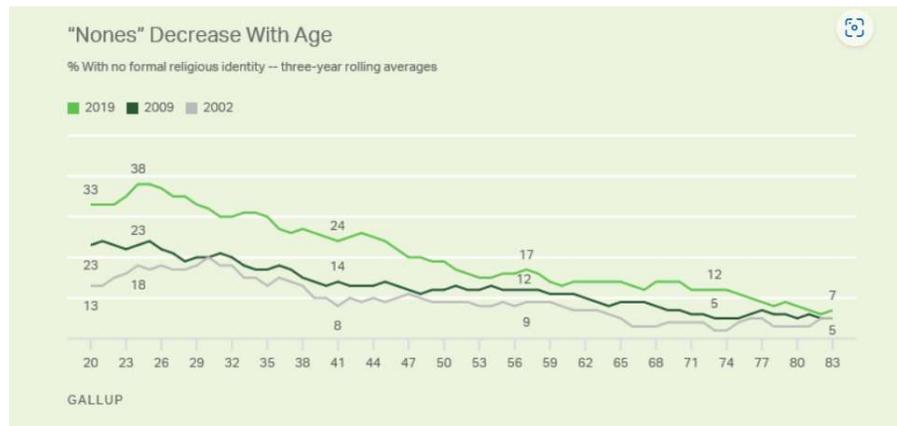
Americans With No Religious Identity. The percentage of the U.S. population with no religious identity—the “nones” has risen from close to zero in the 1950s to about one-fifth of the U.S. adult population today. The rise of the “nones” is the attention-grabbing phrase used to describe the well-documented increase in the percentage of Americans who, when queried by survey researchers about their religious identification, say “none.” The research shows that between about 20% and 25% of U.S. adults are now “nones”. This social trend has received significant publicity in recent years, based on research produced by Gallup, Pew Research Center, NORC's General Social Survey and others. Most of these researchers operate on the assumption that the percentage of “nones” will continue rising—part of a general trend toward secularization in U.S. society. However, our trend on religious identity suggests some caution in assuming that these trends are inexorable. Over the past six years (2017-2022), **the rise of the “nones” has stabilized.** An average of 20% or 21% of Americans in Gallup surveys in each of these years say they don't have a formal religious identity.



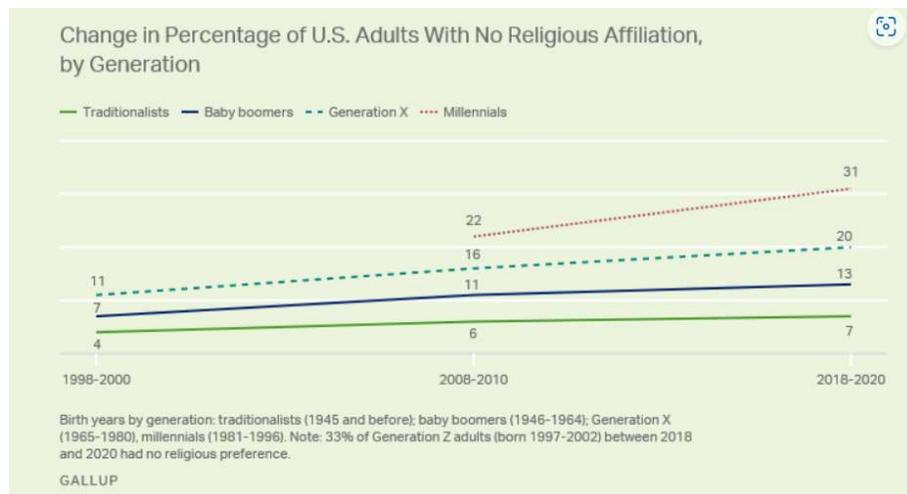
NEWPORT, FRANK. “Slow Down in the Rise of Religious Nones”, Polling Matters, December 9, 2022, Gallup Website.

As the religious affiliation weakens, does it not become harder to understand whether our choices are the 'right' ones? Our decisions are no longer based on universal, moral standards but relative standards based on self-interest. This sense of endless choice in our lives create a nearly perpetual panic of never knowing whether we're living as we should. Yet people tend to become so used to freedom to choose that they insist on retaining their freedom of choice regardless of the consequences. In contrast, those who identify as more religious appear to be happier and more secure in several key areas of life, according to a Pew Research Center report from 2019, which found that those affiliated with religion were more likely to consider themselves "very happy" in most countries included.

The Non-Affiliated "Nones" Decrease with Age. The basic sociological structure of religiosity by age is well-established and has been evident for decades. It's a firmly set "**generational**" pattern -- that occurs to every generation of individuals across time, not just a particular cohort. Generational changes in religiosity -- like gray hair and the need for bifocals -- happen consistently to every generation as they age and are not specific to a particular time period. **Religiosity plummets after age 18**, coincident with young people leaving home and heading out into the real world of work or college. Then, **religiosity begins to rise again as young people go through their 30s**, coincident with marriage, children and more stable involvement in specific communities. Religious affiliation generally continues to rise with age.



Change in Percent of U.S. Adults With No Religious Affiliation. The two major trends driving the drop in church membership—more adults with no religious preference and falling rates of church membership among people who do have a religion—are apparent in each of the generations over time. Since the turn of the century, there has been a near doubling in the percentage of traditionalists (from 4% to 7%), baby boomers (from 7% to 13%) and Gen Xers (11% to 20%) with no religious affiliation. Currently, 31% of millennials have no religious affiliation, which is up from 22% a decade ago. Similarly, 33% of the portion of Generation Z that has reached adulthood have no religious preference.



Church Membership Decline Seen in All Major Subgroups. As would be expected given the 20-point decline in church membership overall, the Gallup data show declines among all major subgroups of the U.S. population beyond age, with some differences in the size of that decline.

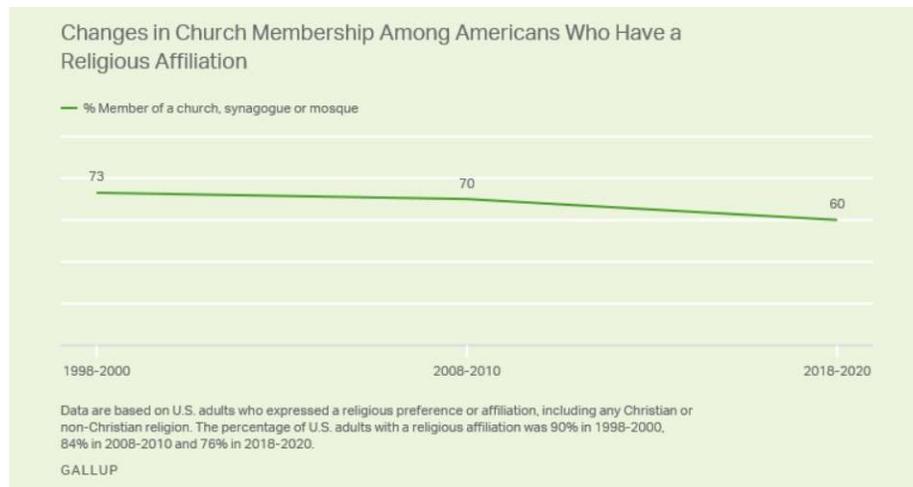
Among religious groups, the decline in membership is steeper among Catholics (down 18 points, from 76% to 58%) than Protestants (down nine points, from 73% to 64%). This mirrors the historical changes in church attendance that Gallup has documented among Catholics, with sharp declines among Catholics but not among Protestants. In addition to Protestants, declines in church membership are proportionately smaller among political conservatives, Republicans, married adults and college graduates. These groups tend to have among the highest rates of church membership, along with Southern residents and non-Hispanic Black adults.

Changes in Church Membership, by Demographic Subgroup

	1998-2000	2008-2010	2018-2020	Change, 1998-2000 to 2018-2020
	%	%	%	pct. pts.
Men	64	58	46	-18
Women	73	65	53	-20
Non-Hispanic White adults	68	62	52	-16
Non-Hispanic Black adults	78	70	59	-19
College graduate	68	65	54	-14
Not college graduate	69	60	47	-22
Married	71	68	58	-13
Not married	64	55	42	-22
Republican	77	75	65	-12
Independent	59	51	41	-18
Democrat	71	60	46	-25
Conservative	78	73	64	-14
Moderate	66	59	45	-21
Liberal	56	46	35	-21
East	69	58	44	-25
Midwest	72	66	54	-18
South	74	70	58	-16
West	57	51	38	-19
Protestant	73	72	64	-9
Catholic	76	73	58	-18

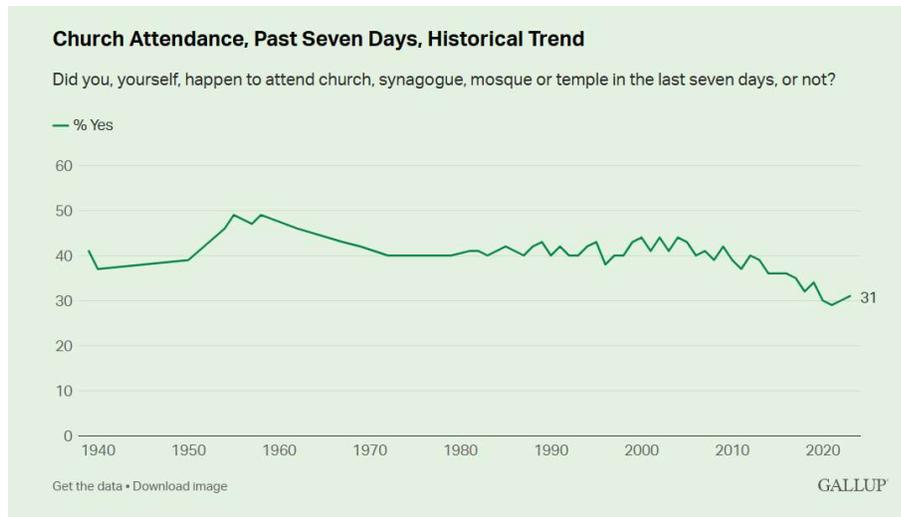
GALLUP

Decrease in Church Membership Among Those With Religious Affiliation. Between 1998 and 2000, an average of 73% of religious Americans belonged to a church, synagogue or mosque. Over the past three years, the average has fallen to 60%.



JONES, JEFFREY M, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority For First Time", Politics, March 29, 2021, Gallup Website.

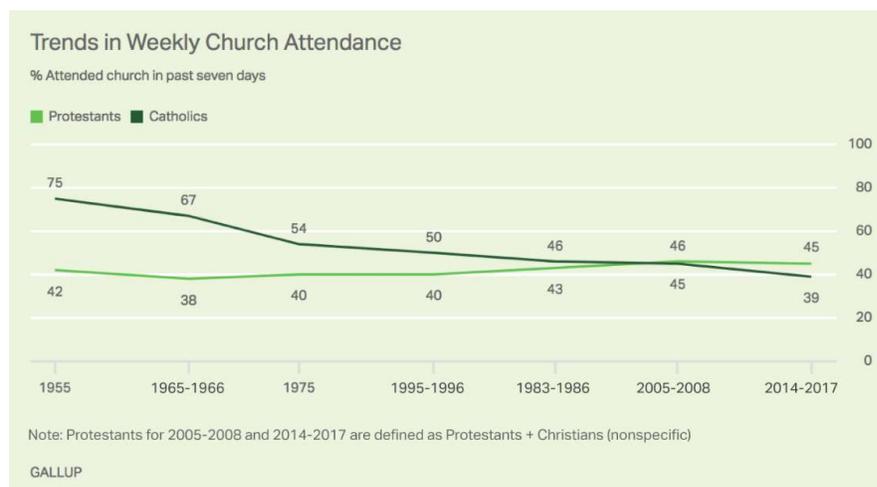
Church Attendance Past Seven Days. Consider the responses to the question, “Did you, yourself, happen to attend church, mosque or temple in the last seven days or not?” U.S. church attendance has shown a small but noticeable decline compared with what it was before the COVID-19 pandemic. In the four years before the pandemic, 2016 through 2019, an average of 34% of U.S. adults said they had attended church, synagogue, mosque or temple in the past seven days. From 2020 to the present, the average has been 30%, including a 31% reading in a May 1-24 survey. The recent church attendance levels are about 10 percentage points lower than what Gallup measured in 2012 and most prior years.



JONES, JEFFREY M., “U.S. Church Attendance Still Lower Than Pre-Pandemic, Religion,” June 26, 2023, Gallup Website.

The coronavirus pandemic caused millions of Americans to avoid public gatherings, and many houses of worship were closed to help limit the spread of COVID-19. Still, Americans were able to worship remotely through services broadcast over the internet, television or radio. Most of those who reported attending religious services in 2020 said they did so virtually. Even accounting for remote attendance, however, church attendance figures were lower than in prior years.

Weekly Church Attendance Catholic vs Protestant. Weekly church attendance has declined among U.S. Catholics in the past decade, while it has remained steady among Protestants. From 2014-2017, an average of 39% of Catholics reported attending church in the past seven days. This is down from an average of 45% from 2005-2008 and represents a steep decline from 75% in 1955. By contrast, the 45% of Protestants who reported attending church weekly from 2014-2017 is essentially unchanged from a decade ago and is largely consistent with the long-term trend.



JONES, JEFFREY M. “U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority For First Time”, Politics, March 29, 2021, Gallup Website.

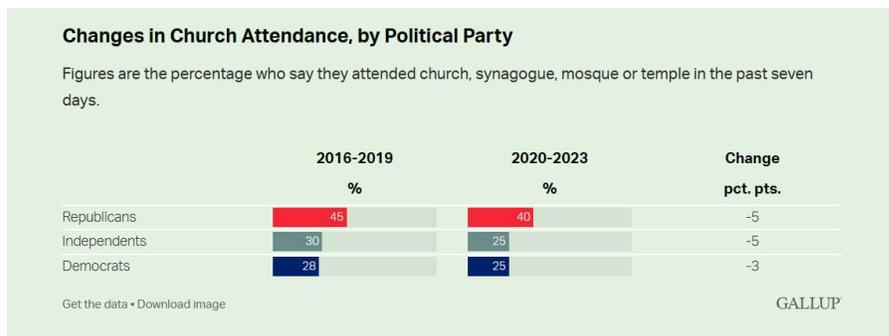
Although the rate at which Protestants attend church has held firm over the past six decades, the percentage of Americans identifying as Protestant has declined sharply, from 71% in 1955 to 47% in the mid-2010s. Since 1999, Gallup's definition of

Protestants has included those using the generic term "Christian" as well as those calling themselves Protestant or naming a specific Protestant faith.

By contrast, while the Catholic Church has suffered declining attendance in the U.S., the overall percentage of Catholics has held fairly steady -- largely because of the growth if the U.S. Hispanic population. 22% of U.S. adults today identify as Catholic, compared with 24% in 1955.

However, a troubling sign for both denominations is that younger adults, particularly those aged 21 to 29, are less likely than older adults to identify as either Protestant or Catholic. This is partly because more young people identify as "other" or with other non-Christian religions, but mostly because of the large proportion identifying with no religion—the “nones”.

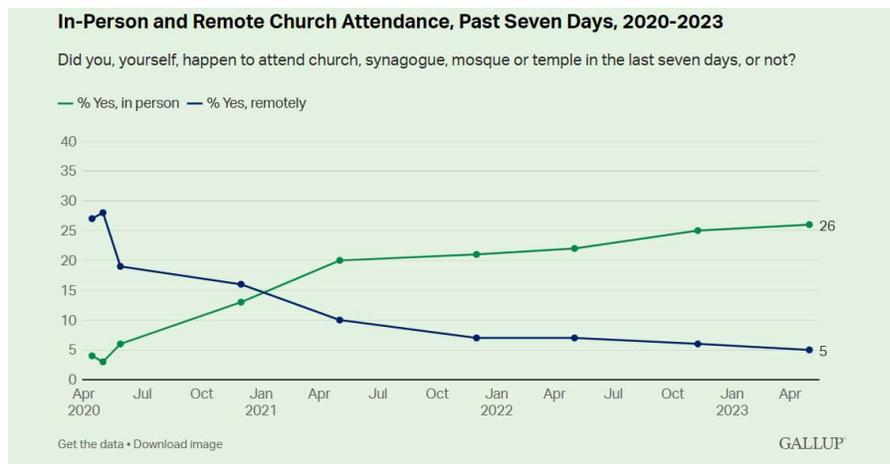
Church Attendance By Political Affiliation. Republicans, Democrats and independents show similar declines in church attendance since the pandemic began -- between three and five percentage points -- though Republicans (40%) remain much more likely than Democrats (25%) or independents (25%) to attend religious services.



JONES, JEFFREY M, "U.S. Church Attendance Still Lower Than Pre-Pandemic, Religion," June 26, 2023, Gallup Website.

Impact of Pandemic. The first time Gallup asked about church attendance after the pandemic began, in April 2020, 31% of U.S. adults said they had attended religious services in the past seven days, with 27% doing so virtually and 4% in person. For much of 2020, far more people attended virtually than in person, with overall attendance rates ranging from 25% to 31%.

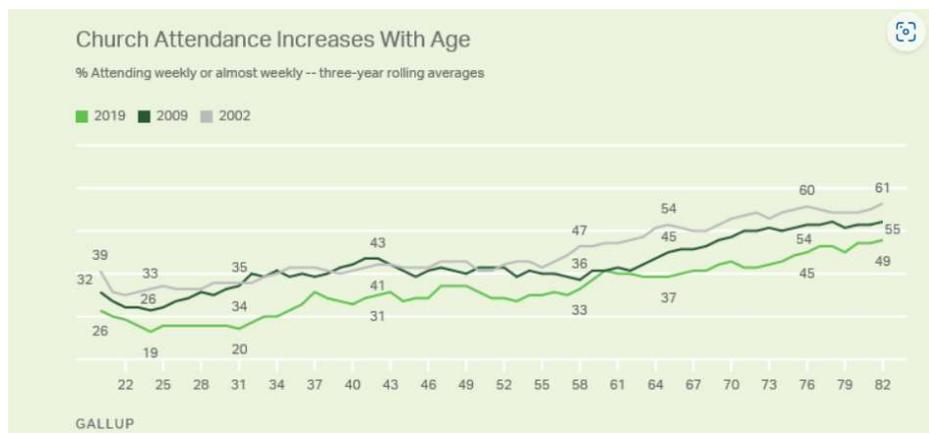
In May 2021, after COVID-19 vaccines were widely available, overall church attendance was steady at 30%, with about twice as many attending in person as remotely. Since then, the percentage attending in person has continued to grow, to 26% in the May 2023 survey. Now, just 5% say they attend virtually. Those numbers are essentially the reverse of what Gallup measured in the early months of the pandemic.



JONES, JEFFREY M, "U.S. Church Attendance Still Lower Than Pre-Pandemic, Religion," June 26, 2023, Gallup Website.

The current figures indicate that 84% of U.S. adults who recently attended religious services did so in person, while 16% did so remotely. The proportions of in-person and remote attendance are generally similar by subgroup. The pandemic had a profound effect on U.S. society, and it continues to have an impact in some ways. Americans have been less likely to attend religious services over the past three years, and at this point, it does not appear that church attendance will revert to pre-pandemic levels. These recent trends have added to the [longer-term decline in religious participation that Gallup has documented](#) over the past two decades.

Church Attendance Increases With Age. There is **some good news for those concerned about the future of the church.** Americans as a whole are less likely to say they have a formal religious identity, and less likely to report being frequent church attenders. These trends are more evident among millennials than among those who are older. But **the generational patterns by which people return to religion as they age still appear to be evident.** Older millennials are more likely than younger millennials to have a religious identity, and older millennials are more likely than younger millennials to say they attend religious services frequently.



Based on this data, predictions of the forthcoming demise of religion as we know it may be premature. Broad structural changes in society and culture may well continue to affect religiosity across all groups, but the big bulge of millennials may actually get more religious as they age.

Implications. The U.S. remains a religious nation, with more than seven in 10 affiliating with some type of organized religion. However, far fewer, now less than half, have a formal membership with a specific house of worship. While it is possible that part of the decline seen in 2020 was temporary and related to the coronavirus pandemic, continued decline in future decades seems inevitable, given the much lower levels of religiosity and church membership among younger versus older generations of adults.

Churches are only as strong as their membership and are dependent on their members for service support (typically referred to as *time* and *talent*) and financial support (typically referred to as *treasure*) to keep operating. Because it is unlikely that people who do not have a religious preference will become church members, the challenge for church leaders is to encourage those who do affiliate with a specific faith to become active, church members.

Why Those Affiliated With A Religion Attend Church. A 2017 Gallup study provides insight into why those affiliated with a religion choose to attend church. The study found that churchgoers cited sermons as the primary reason they attended church. Majorities of those responding also said spiritual programs geared toward children and teenagers, community outreach and volunteer opportunities, and dynamic leaders were factors in their attendance. Therefore, a focus on some of these factors may also help local church leaders encourage people who share their faith to join their church.

March 22: Concept of Resurrection

Before examining the Gospel evidence of Jesus' appearances after his crucifixion, let's consider how the concept of "resurrection" was viewed in Jesus' day and address some of the skeptics that question aspects of Jesus crucifixion.

First let's contrast the concepts of *resuscitation* and *resurrection*.

- *Resuscitation* refers to the reanimation of a corpse—a person dead or thought to be dead comes back to life and resumes the life she or he had before; the person will die again someday! Resuscitation intrinsically involves something happening to a corpse.
- *Resurrection* means some quite different. In the context of first-century, Jewish culture it refers to entry into another kind of existence, a level or realm that is beyond death. It does not refer to resumption of one's previous life.

Christianity was born at a time when the concept of resurrection—a central tenet of the Christian faith—was widely considered a false concept in the Roman culture except for Judaism. But even within Judaism, the Jewish group known as Sadducees denied the concept. Also the concept does not mean "raised to heaven" or "taken up in glory" as God did with Elijah or Enoch. Resurrection only can happen to people who are already dead.

For early Christians, resurrection was believed to consist of passing through death and out the other side into a new sort of bodily life.

¹¹ And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you. (Romans 8:11)

After Jesus' crucifixion, didn't the followers interact with Jesus as a living "entity"? Didn't some claim to see him? Didn't some claim to speak with him? Didn't some claim to touch him? Didn't some claim to eat with him? These experiences with Jesus portray the risen Christ in different ways:

- Sometimes Jesus is pictured as a *physical* being (e.g., cooks breakfast, eats a bite of fish, ask to be touched, etc...)
- Sometimes Jesus is pictured as *nonphysical* being and mysterious (i.e., passes through walls, vanishes suddenly, capable of being present without being recognized, etc...)

But why did early Christians believe so strongly in Jesus' resurrection?

Wasn't it because they unequivocally believed Jesus had been raised from dead? Jesus did not simply resume his previous life as a finite person, limited in time and space, and then die again. Rather, Jesus entered another level of existence—*"raised to the right hand of God."*

¹⁹ After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God.

²⁰ Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it. (Mark 16:19-20)

Doesn't the truth of Christianity rest heavily on the resurrection being a historical fact?

Some skeptics often question rather Jesus was actually buried in the tomb, as well as rose from the tomb. History tells us that as a general rule, crucified criminals were left on the cross to be devoured by birds or were thrown into a common grave leading some to conclude that Jesus' body was probably dug up and consumed by wild dogs. But those who promote such views ignore the evidence for Jesus.

- *Jesus body was turned over to Joseph of Arimathea.* Skeptics question this "fact" because Joseph was a member of the Sanhedrin—the very council that voted to condemn Jesus.

First, consider that the Apostle Paul passes along a “**creed**” of the church—a statement that Christians would recite to summarize their beliefs—that mentions the burial of Jesus. Many scholars believe this creed goes back to within a few years of Jesus’ crucifixion, having been given to Paul, after his conversion, in Damascus or in his subsequent visit to Jerusalem when he met the apostles James and Peter.

³For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. ⁶After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. (1 Corinthians 15:3-7)

This creed provides a 4-line formula that correspond line by line to what the Gospels teach!

- ✓ The first line refers to the *crucifixion of Jesus*—“*Christ died*”.
- ✓ The second line refers to the *burial of Jesus*—“*he was buried*”.
- ✓ The third line refers to the *resurrection of Jesus*—“*he was raised*”.
- ✓ The fourth line refers to the *appearances of Jesus* after His resurrection—“*he appeared*”.

Joseph of Arimathea is mentioned in all four gospels. In addition, the burial story in gospel of Mark is so extremely early that it’s simply not possible for it to have been subject to legendary corruption. But how do scholars know it is early?

- ✓ The gospel of Mark is considered to be the earliest gospel.
- ✓ The gospel of Mark basically consists of short anecdotes about Jesus rather than a narrative, except during “passion week” when it provides a continuous narrative of events in sequence. This implies the passion story was taken from an even earlier source.

The gospel of Luke also notes that Joseph of Arimathea, while a member of the Sanhedrin, did not vote to kill Jesus. In fact, he was a secret follower of Jesus.

⁵⁰Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, ⁵¹who had not consented to their decision and action. (Luke 23:50-51)

³⁸Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate’s permission, he came and took the body away. ³⁹He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds.^[c] ⁴⁰Taking Jesus’ body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs. (John 19:38)

- But does the creed leave room for possibility that the resurrection was only spiritual in nature and that Jesus’ body was still in the tomb?

Consider that the Jews had a physical concept of resurrection. For them, the primary object of the resurrection was the bones of the deceased—not even the flesh, which was thought to be perishable. After the flesh rotted away, the Jews practiced what some call a secondary burial. About a year or so after death, they gathered the bones of their deceased and put them in boxes, called ossuaries, to be preserved until the resurrection at the end of the world—when God would raise the righteous dead. This custom, called *ossilegium* by scholars today, was practiced by Jews mainly in Jerusalem and environs for about a hundred years—from just before the turn of the era until the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. (the late Second Temple period).

Therefore, it would have simply been a contradiction in terms for an early Jew to say that someone was raised from the dead but his body was still left in the tomb. Consequently the wording of the early Christian creed that “*Jesus was buried and raised*” it is implicitly saying the tomb was empty.

- **But how secure was the tomb?** Based on excavations of first-century tombs, a large disk-shaped stone was rolled down a groove to cover the tomb entrance. While it would have been easy to roll the large disk down the groove, it would have taken several men to roll the stone up the groove to reopen the tomb.

Was the tomb guarded? Skeptics have attempted to cast doubt on the popular belief that Jesus’ tomb was carefully watched around the clock by highly disciplined Roman soldiers who would have faced death if they failed their duty.

The gospel of Matthew states that the tomb was guarded.

The Guard at the Tomb. ⁶² *The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the **chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate.** ⁶³ “Sir,” they said, “we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver [referring to Jesus] said, ‘After three days I will rise again.’ ⁶⁴ So **give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first.**” ⁶⁵ **“Take a guard,” Pilate answered. “Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how.”** ⁶⁶ **So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard. (Matthew 27:62-66)***

Is there any evidence to support Matthew’s assertion about guards? Consider the competing initial claims in the first century between the Jews and Christians. Christians claimed, “*Jesus is risen.*” Jews responded “*The disciples stole his body.*” Then the Christians responded, “*But the guards at the tomb would have prevented a theft.*” To which the Jews would have responded “*But the guards fell asleep.*” Does this not suggest the guards were a historical which is why the Jews invented an absurd story about the guards falling asleep. While the disciples took the body.

Jesus Has Risen. ²⁸ *After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.² There was a violent earthquake, for an **angel of the Lord came down from heaven** and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴ The **guards were so afraid** of him that they shook and became like dead men.⁵ The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.”⁸ So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”*

The Guards’ Report. ¹¹ *While the women were on their way, **some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened.** ¹² When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they **gave the soldiers a large sum of money,** ¹³ **telling them, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’** ¹⁴ If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” ¹⁵ So the **soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed.** And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day. (Matthew 28:1-15)*

Matthew included the account of the guards in order to respond to and refute an actual claim in circulation, of which certain details were generally known to Jews at the time, i.e., that Roman guards had been placed at the tomb of Jesus following his crucifixion, and that a rumor, seemingly originating from these guards, claimed “*the disciples had stolen the body during the night while we sleep.*”

But why would Jewish authorities have placed guards at the tomb? First, there is a question of whether or not Matthew intended the guards to be understood as being Roman soldiers, or perhaps instead members of the Temple guard. Various arguments have been put forward on either side. The case for the guards being Roman seems stronger. Consider that the guards are called “soldiers” at one point, and in the Greek, it seems, the sense is “infantrymen”—which the Temple Guards were not. Further, while Pilate stated to the chief priests that “you have a guard” seem to suggest the priests used their own Temple guard, that reading is uncertain. If Pilate had not cared or thought it important enough to secure the tomb with his own men, it makes little sense he would punish the Temple guards for falling asleep on duty. Furthermore, if we were speaking of Temple guards, there would not have been any need for the chief priest to bribe men under his own command. Given the evidence, it seems Matthew described a unit of Roman guards at the tomb.

Also consider that the Gospel of John tells us that it was a Roman centurion who led Roman soldiers to arrest Jesus under the direction of Jewish authorities. So there is precedent for the Roman guards reporting to Jewish religious authorities which therefore supports the view they could also be involved in guarding the tomb.

- Did Jesus really spend three days and nights in the tomb as He prophesized?

The Sign of Jonah. ³⁸ Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, “Teacher, we want to see a sign from you.” ³⁹ He answered, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so **the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.** ⁴¹ The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now something greater than Jonah is here. ⁴² The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, and now something greater than Solomon is here. (Matthew 12:40)

The gospels reports that Jesus was really in the tomb one full day, two full nights, and part of two days. However, most scholars recognize that according to early Jewish time-reckoning, any part of day is counted as a full day. Jesus was in the tomb Friday afternoon, all day Saturday, and on Sunday morning. Based on how Jews conceptualized time back then, this would have counted as three days.

- Can the witnesses to the empty tomb be trusted? The gospels agree that the empty was discovered by women who were friends and followers of Jesus. Doesn’t their relationship with Jesus call into question their reliability as witnesses? Certainly these women were friends of Jesus! But when you understand the role of women in first-century Jewish society, what’s really extraordinary is that the gospel would feature women as discoverers of the empty tomb in the first place.

In first-century Jewish culture, women were on the very low rung of the social ladder. Consider the following:

- ✓ Old rabbinical sayings stated, “Let the words of Law be burned rather than deliver to women.”
- ✓ “Blessed is he whose children are male, but woe to him whose children are female.”

Also, women’s testimony was regarded as so worthless that they weren’t even allowed to serve as legal witnesses in a Jewish court of law.

Consequently, is it not remarkable that the chief witnesses to the empty tomb were women who were friends of Jesus? Would not any “legendary” account written later have portrayed witnesses as male disciples? The fact that the gospel accounts mention women therefore is most plausibly explained by the reality that women indeed discovered the empty tomb! The gospel writers faithfully recorded exactly what happened, even if it was embarrassing.

- So is the empty tomb an historical fact? Consider the following:

- ✓ Clearly the concept of an empty tomb is implicit in the early Christian tradition passed along by Paul which is a very old and reliable source.

³*For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that **he was buried**, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. ⁶After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. (1 Corinthians 15:3-7)*

- ✓ The site of Jesus' tomb was known to Christians and Jews alike. So if it weren't empty, would it not be impossible for a movement founded on the belief in the resurrection to have come into existence in the same city where Jesus had been publicly executed and buried.
- ✓ Based on language, grammar, and style, scholars have determined that Mark got his empty tomb story from an earlier source. In fact, there is evidence it was written before 37 AD, which is much too early for a "legend" to have corrupted it.
- ✓ Consider the simplicity of the empty tomb narrative. Fictional apocryphal accounts from the second-century contain flowery narratives, in which Jesus come out of the tomb in glory and power with everyone seeing him.
- ✓ The unanimous testimony of the gospels that the empty tomb was discovered by women argues for the authenticity of the story because it would have been embarrassing for the disciples to admit and most certainly would have been covered up if this were a legend.
- ✓ The earliest Jewish polemic presupposes the historicity of an empty tomb. No one was claiming the tomb still contained Jesus' body. The question was always, 'What happened to the body?'
- ✓ As long as the existence of God is plausible, then it's clearly possible that God intervened in human history by raising Jesus from the dead.

Spiritual Nugget #12

What is the greatest commandment in the Law?

Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind."

The second greatest command is "Love your neighbor as yourself."

March 23: Appearances By Jesus, Part 2—Did Any One See Him?

So, if Jesus rose from the grave, did anyone see him? One of the earliest Christian creeds mentions Jesus appearing.

*³For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and that **he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.** ⁶After that, he **appeared to more than five hundred** of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he **appeared to James, then to all the apostles,** ⁸and last of all he **appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.** (1 Corinthians 15:3-7)*

How far back can the creed mentioned by the apostle Paul be dated? It is known that Paul wrote 1 Corinthians between 55-57 A.D. He also indicates that he has already passed on this creed to the church at Corinth, which means it must predate his visit there in 51 A.D. These facts establish the creed being used within twenty years of the resurrection. However, some scholars trace it back even further, to within two to eight years of the resurrection, or about 32-38 A.D. when Paul received it in either Damascus or Jerusalem. Also consider that Paul personally affirms that Jesus appeared to him, so this creed provides firsthand testimony. Further, the leading view is that Paul got the information directly from the eyewitnesses Peter and James and he took great pains to confirm its accuracy. In Paul's letter to Galatians he describes a trip to Jerusalem where he met with Peter and James. In his description he used the Greek word—*historeo*—which means the trip was investigative inquiry!

*¹¹I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that **the gospel I preached is not of human origin.** ¹²I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, **I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.** ...
¹⁷I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. **Later I returned to Damascus.** ¹⁸Then **after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days.** ¹⁹**I saw none of the other apostles—only James, the Lord's brother.** ²⁰I assure you before God that what I am writing you is no lie. (Galatians 1:11-12, 17-20)*

Note that the "creed" does not mention any of the women that Jesus appeared to. As discussed earlier, this is not surprising since the testimony of women in first-century Jewish culture would not carry any weight.

How credible are the witnesses? Didn't Jesus' disciples, who claimed to see the risen Jesus, go out and turn the world upside down taking the Gospel of Jesus Christ fearlessly to most of the known world and often in the face of every form of opposition, persecution, brutality, torture and death? Didn't most eventually die for spreading the "Good News"?

Yet, before Jesus was crucified, the disciples were, for the most part, cowards. Peter denied even knowing Jesus three times before the crucifixion. And the week after the crucifixion weren't the disciples totally demoralized and hiding behind "*door locked for fear of the Jews*" terrified they would be executed next. But something changed them from cowards to bold preachers! Anyone who understands human nature knows people do not change that much without some major influence. Also, people rarely die for half-hearted beliefs! So what happened? **What transformed these fearful disciples and convinced them to risk their lives to fulfill the *Great Commission* that Jesus charged them with before his accession into heaven?** Could it be that they actually saw Jesus—bodily risen from the dead—as claimed in the Bible? Was it the seeing, talking and eating with Jesus after the resurrection that transformed them?

Note, the word "*disciple*" refers to a learner or follower. The word "*apostle*" means "one who is sent out." While Jesus was on earth, His twelve followers were called *disciples*. The twelve disciples followed Jesus Christ, learned from Him, and were trained by Him. After His resurrection and ascension, Jesus sent the disciples out to be His witnesses.

¹⁸Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. (Matthew 28:18-20)

They were then referred to as the twelve apostles. However, even when Jesus was still on earth, the terms "*disciples*" and "*apostles*" were used somewhat interchangeably.

The twelve disciples/apostles were ordinary men whom God used in an extraordinary manner. Among the twelve were fishermen, a tax collector, and a revolutionary. The Gospels record the constant failings, struggles, and doubts of these twelve men who followed Jesus Christ. The original twelve disciples/apostles are listed in Matthew:

"These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Him." (Matthew 10:2-4)

If Jesus did not actually rise from the dead, why did the disciples go from frightened, timid followers of Jesus before his death, to bold evangelists, in a very short period of time, willing to die preaching his resurrection if they just made the whole thing up and he was still dead? Isn't the answer obvious to anyone who reads the Bible with an open mind and heart? They must have actually seen the risen Jesus!!! What happened after the apostles saw Jesus? Didn't they quit hiding? Didn't they finally understand that Jesus is God incarnate, who saves people from sin? Didn't Peter and the others leave the locked room and boldly preach the risen Christ, unafraid of what would happen to them?

If the disciples faked the resurrection, they would know Christianity is a lie. Do you think the Jesus' disciples would have been willing to be tortured and killed for a known lie? You don't need a degree in human psychology to know that people do not die for a cause they *know* to be false! People certainly do die for false beliefs all the time, but they *think* they are dying for the truth.

After witnessing Jesus' resurrection and ascension into heaven, the Holy Spirit transformed the disciples/apostles into powerful men of God who turned the world upside down.

⁵ But other Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd.^[a] ⁶ But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other believers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, (Acts 17:5-6).

What was the change? The twelve apostles/disciples had "*been with Jesus*" (Acts 4:13). Tradition and history records that ten of the original apostles were tortured and killed as martyrs for Christ, as did the Apostle Paul and James, Jesus' brother.

1. Peter was crucified head down in Rome, 66 A.D.
2. Andrew was bound to death. He preached until his death in 74 A.D.
3. James, son of Zebedee, was beheaded in Jerusalem by the sword. (Acts 12:1-9).
4. John was banished to the Isle of Patmos, 96 A.D. (Rev. 1- 9).
5. Phillip was crucified at Heirapole, Phryga, 52 A.D.
6. Bartholomew was beaten, crucified, then beheaded by the command of a king about 52 A.D.
7. Thomas was run through by a lance at Corehandal, East Indies about 52 A.D.
8. Matthew was slain by the sword in the city of Ethiopia about 60 A.D.
9. James, son of Alphaeus, was thrown from a pinnacle, then beaten to death, 60 A.D.
10. Thaddeus was shot to death by arrows, 72 A.D.
11. Simon was crucified in Persia, 74 A.D.

Yet, there is no evidence that any of them said, under torture "okay, okay, we made the whole thing up"? Isn't the reason for their courage clear—they must have actually seen the risen Jesus? Doesn't their eventual fate offer us a strong witness that they actually saw the resurrected Christ and believed, without any doubt, what they taught?

Two additional, dramatic changes of individuals are worth noting as further evidence that Jesus actually appeared to people after his crucifixion:

- Consider how James, the brother of Jesus changed. James had been openly skeptical that Jesus was the Messiah. However, later James became a courageous leader of the Jerusalem church, eventually being stoned to death for

his faith. What changed James? The Bible says the risen Christ appeared to him ([1 Corinthians 15:7](#)). What a shock to see your own brother, alive again, after you knew he was dead.

- *Consider the conversion of Paul—one of the most drastically changed lives in the Bible!* As Saul of Tarsus, he was an aggressive persecutor of the early church, even overseeing the stoning of Stephen. Yet, after the risen Christ appeared to Paul on the Damascus Road ([Acts 9:1-5](#), [Acts 26:10-15](#), [1 Corinthians 15:8](#)), Paul became Christianity's most determined missionary. He endured five floggings, three beatings, three shipwrecks, a stoning, poverty, and years of ridicule. Finally the Roman emperor Nero had Paul beheaded because the apostle refused to deny his faith in Jesus. What could make a person willingly accept—even welcome—such hardships? Doesn't Paul's story provide proof that he truly encountered Jesus Christ who had risen from the dead?

The Apostle Paul figures prominently in the Acts of the Apostles and his letters form a large part of the New Testament. He also played a vital role in taking the Gospel to Gentiles and in developing a theology of Christianity proving it be a new religion and not a Jewish cult. Over the centuries, he has therefore been described by some commentators as the "inventor" of Christianity. But to place Paul into perspective within the Christian story, as important, as brilliant, as brave, as loyal to Christ as he was, a number of points should be borne in mind:

- It was Jesus during his ministry on earth, who preached the Gospel in Judea and beyond - and not only to Jews (for example [Matthew 8:5-13](#) and [15:21-28](#), [Luke 17:11-19](#)).
- Of the apostles, it was Peter who first brought Gentiles into the Christian fold ([Acts 10](#)), and other Jews who converted many Gentiles in Syrian Antioch ([Acts 11:19](#)) before Paul's arrival there.
- The church in Rome was already established by the time Paul wrote his letter to the Romans.
- The areas evangelized by Paul (i.e., Cyprus, the south and western half of Asia Minor, and Greece) cover only a part of the locations traditionally visited by the original apostles.

Were not James, Paul and the Apostles effective missionaries because people could tell that these men had touched and seen the risen Christ? With such zealous eyewitnesses, the early church exploded in growth, spreading west from Jerusalem to Rome and beyond.

Spiritual Nugget #13

But if there be no resurrection of the dead,

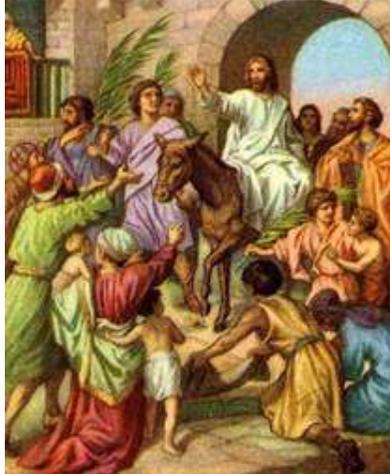
then is Christ not risen?

And if Christ be not risen,

then is our preaching vain,

and your faith is also vain?

March 24: Historical Perspective on Palm Sunday



On Palm Sunday Christians celebrate **the triumphal entry of Jesus Christ into Jerusalem**, the week before his death and resurrection.

Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. (John 12: 1)

According to the Gospels, before entering Jerusalem, Jesus was staying at Bethany and Bethphage, and the Gospel of John adds that he had dinner with Lazarus, and his sisters Mary and Martha. While there, Jesus sent two disciples to the village over against them, in order to retrieve a donkey that had been tied up but never been ridden, and to say, if questioned, that the donkey was needed by the Lord but would be returned. Jesus then rode the donkey into Jerusalem, with the Synoptics adding that the disciples had first put their cloaks on it, so as to make it more comfortable.

Jesus Comes to Jerusalem as King. *¹² The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. (John 12: 12)*

For many Christian churches, Palm Sunday, often referred to as "Passion Sunday," marks the beginning of Holy Week, which concludes on Easter Sunday.

The biblical account of Palm Sunday is mentioned in all four Gospels. Putting the four accounts together, it becomes clear that the triumphal entry was a significant event, not only to the people of Jesus' day, but to Christians throughout history. We celebrate Palm Sunday to remember that momentous occasion.

*As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away." ⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: ⁵ "Say to Daughter Zion, 'See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'" ⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. ⁸ A very large crowd **spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.** ⁹ The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed **shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!"** ¹⁰ When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?" ¹¹ The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee." (Matthew 21:1-11)*

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples, ² saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there,

which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here shortly.'" ⁴ They went and found a colt outside in the street, tied at a doorway. As they untied it, ⁵ some people standing there asked, "What are you doing, untying that colt?" ⁶ They answered as Jesus had told them to, and the people let them go. ⁷ When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. ⁸ Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. ⁹ Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, "Hosannah" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" ¹⁰ "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!" ¹¹ Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the Twelve. **(Mark 11:1-11)**

²⁸ After Jesus had said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹ As he approached Bethphage and Bethany at the hill called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, ³⁰ "Go to the village ahead of you, and as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹ If anyone asks you, 'Why are you untying it?' say, 'The Lord needs it.'" ³² Those who were sent ahead went and found it just as he had told them. ³³ As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, "Why are you untying the colt?" ³⁴ They replied, "The Lord needs it." ³⁵ They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it. ³⁶ As he went along, people spread their cloaks on the road. ³⁷ When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen: ³⁸ "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" ³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples!" ⁴⁰ "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." ⁴¹ As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it ⁴² and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. ⁴⁴ They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you." **(Luke 19:28-44)**

The next day the great crowd that had come for the festival heard that Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. ¹³ They took palm branches and went out to meet him, shouting, "Hosanna!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Blessed is the king of Israel!" ¹⁴ Jesus found a young donkey and sat on it, as it is written: ¹⁵ "Do not be afraid, Daughter Zion; see, your king is coming, seated on a donkey's colt." ¹⁶ At first his disciples did not understand all this. Only after Jesus was glorified did they realize that these things had been written about him and that these things had been done to him. ¹⁷ Now the crowd that was with him when he called Lazarus from the tomb and raised him from the dead continued to spread the word. ¹⁸ Many people, because they had heard that he had performed this sign, went out to meet him. ¹⁹ So the Pharisees said to one another, "See, this is getting us nowhere. Look how the whole world has gone after him!" **(John 12:12-19).**

On that day, Jesus rode into Jerusalem on the back of a borrowed donkey's colt, one that had never been ridden before. The disciples spread their cloaks on the donkey for Jesus to sit on, and the multitudes came out to welcome Him, laying before Him their cloaks and the branches of palm trees. The people hailed and praised Him as the "King who comes in the name of the Lord" as He rode to the temple, where He taught the people, healed them, and drove out the money-changers and merchants who had made His Father's house a "den of robbers."

¹⁷ And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'" **(Mark 11:17)**

Jesus' purpose in riding into Jerusalem was to make public His claim to be their Messiah and King of Israel in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Matthew says that the King coming on the foal of a donkey was an exact fulfillment of [Zechariah 9:9](#)

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. **(Zechariah 9:9)**

Jesus rides into His capital city as a conquering King and is hailed by the people as such, in the manner of the day. The streets of Jerusalem, the royal city, are open to Him, and like a king He ascends to His palace, not a temporal palace but the

spiritual palace that is the temple, because His is a spiritual kingdom. He receives the worship and praise of the people because only He deserves it. No longer does He tell His disciples to be quiet about Him but to shout His praises and worship Him openly.

¹⁶*He warned them not to tell others about him. (Matthew 12:16)*

²⁰*Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. (Matthew 16:20)*

Unfortunately, the praise the people lavished on Jesus was not because they recognized Him as their Savior from sin. They welcomed Him out of their desire for a messianic deliverer, someone who would lead them in a revolt against Rome. There were many who, though they did not believe in Christ as Savior, nevertheless hoped that perhaps He would be to them a great temporal deliverer. These are the ones who hailed Him as King with their many hosannas, recognizing Him as the Son of David who came in the name of the Lord. But when He failed in their expectations, when He refused to lead them in a massive revolt against the Roman occupiers, the crowds quickly turned on Him. Within just a few days, their hosannas would change to cries of "*Crucify Him!*" Those who hailed Him as a hero would soon reject and abandon Him.

²⁰*Wanting to release Jesus, Pilate appealed to them again. ²¹ But they kept shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" (Luke 23:20-21).*

The story of the triumphal entry is one of contrasts, and those contrasts contain applications to believers. It is the story of the King who came as a lowly servant on a donkey, not a prancing steed, not in royal robes, but on the clothes of the poor and humble. Jesus Christ comes not to conquer by force as earthly kings but by love, grace, mercy, and His own sacrifice for His people. His is not a kingdom of armies and splendor but of lowliness and servanthood. He conquers not nations but hearts and minds. His message is one of peace with God, not of temporal peace. If Jesus has made a triumphal entry into our hearts, He reigns there in peace and love. As His followers, we exhibit those same qualities, and the world sees the true King living and reigning in triumph in us.

The spreading of cloaks was an act of homage for royalty. The Bible [2 Kings 9:13] reports that Jehu, son of Jehoshaphat, was treated this way Jesus was openly declaring to the people that He was their King and the Messiah they had been waiting for. It was a **common custom** in many lands in the ancient Near East **to cover**, in some way, **the path of someone thought worthy of the highest honor**. Both the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John report that people gave Jesus this form of honor. However, in the Synoptics they are only reported as laying their garments and cut rushes on the street, whereas John more specifically mentions palms. The *palm branch was a symbol of triumph and of victory*, in Jewish tradition, and is treated in other parts of the Bible as such [e.g., Leviticus 23:40 and Revelation 7:9]. Because of this, the scene of the crowd greeting Jesus by waving palms and carpeting his path with them has become symbolic and important. This story is the basis for the custom in many Christian churches of distributing palm leaves (often tied into crosses) to the assembled worshippers on Palm Sunday.

Immediately following this great time of celebration in the ministry of Jesus, he begins his journey to the cross. The people sang part of Psalm 118, "*...Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father, David*". ... [Psalms 118:25-26].

Where this entry took place is unspecified; some scholars argue that the Golden Gate is the likely location, since that was where it was believed the Jewish messiah would enter Jerusalem; other scholars think that an entrance to the south, which had stairs leading directly to the Temple, would be more likely.

March 25: Appearances By Jesus, Part 1—Overview

There is no complete agreement by the various commentators on precisely how many different appearances Jesus made to his disciples. The following reflection attempts to list all the appearances based on scriptural references. Some do not explicitly name Jesus but the wording infers it to be Jesus.

1. To Mary Magdalene Outside The Garden Tomb:

*⁹ When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he **appeared first to Mary Magdalene**, out of whom he had driven seven demons. ¹⁰ She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. ¹¹ When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it.*

(Mark 16:9-11) [Note: The earliest manuscripts and some other ancient witnesses do not have verses 9–20.]

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

*¹¹ Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹² and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. ¹³ They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." ¹⁴ At this, **she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.** ¹⁵ He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"*

*Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher"). ¹⁷ Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her. **(John 20:11-18)***

Commentary: Mary did not want to lose Jesus again. She had not yet understood the resurrection. Perhaps she thought this was his promised second coming. But, Jesus did not want to be detained at the tomb. If he did not ascent to heaven, the Holy Spirit could not come. Both he and Mary had important work to do. Mary did not recognize Jesus at first. Her grief had blinded her; he couldn't see him because she didn't expect to see him. Then he spoke her name, and immediately she recognized him. Imagine the love that flooded her heart when she heard her Savior saying her name. Jesus is near you, and he is calling your name. Can you, like Mary, regard him as your Lord?

2. To Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (the mother of James the Younger and Other Women at the tomb –Mark 16:1) as they hurry from the Garden Tomb:

*¹ After the Sabbath, at **dawn on the first day of the week**, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.*

² There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴ The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

⁵ The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. ⁶ He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. ⁷ Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."

*⁸ So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹ **Suddenly Jesus met them.** "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. ¹⁰ Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."*

(Mathew 28:8-10)

Commentary: By “brothers” (v 10), Jesus probably meant his disciples. This showed that he had forgiven them, even after they had disowned and deserted him. Their relationship would not be even stronger than before. Jesus told the women to pass a message on to the disciples—that he would meet them in Galilee, as he had previously told them (Mark 14:28). But the disciples, afraid of the religious leaders, stayed hidden behind locked doors in Jerusalem (John 20:19). So Jesus met them first there (Luke 24:36) and then later in Galilee (John 21).

3. To Peter (in Jerusalem) at the Garden Tomb:

*³³ They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together ³⁴ and saying, “It is true! The **Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.**” ³⁵ Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke bread. (Luke 24:33-35)*

Commentary: Paul also mentions that Jesus appeared to Peter alone (1 Corinthians 15:5). This appearance is not further described in the Gospels. Jesus showed individual concern for Peter because Peter felt completely unworthy after disowning his Lord. But Peter repented, and Jesus approached him and forgave him. Soon God would use Peter in building Christ’s church.

*³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that **he appeared to Cephas [Peter], and then to the Twelve.** (1 Corinthians 15:3-5)*

Commentary: There will always be people who say that Jesus did not rise from the dead. Paul assures us that many people saw Jesus after his resurrection: Peter, the Twelve, more than 500 believers (most of whom were still alive when Paul wrote this), The resurrection is an historical fact! Don’t be discouraged by doubters who deny the resurrection. Be filled with hope because of the knowledge that one day you, and they, will see the living proof when Christ returns.

4. To Two Disciples on the Emmaus Road Later in the Day:

*¹³ Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles^[a] from Jerusalem. ¹⁴ They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. ¹⁵ As they talked and discussed these things with each other, **Jesus himself came up and walked along with them;** ¹⁶ but they were kept from recognizing him. (Luke 24:13-16)*

*¹² Afterward **Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them** while they were walking in the country. ¹³ These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either. (Mark 16:12-13)*

Commentary: The two disciples returning to Emmaus at first missed the significance of history’s greatest event because they were too focused on their disappointments and problems. In fact, they didn’t recognize Jesus when he was walking beside them. To compound the problem, they were walking in the wrong direction—away from the fellowship of believers in Jerusalem. We are likely to miss Jesus and withdraw from the strength found in other believers when we become preoccupied with our dashed hopes and frustrated plans. Only when we are looking for Jesus in our midst will we experience the power and help he can bring.

5. To the Apostles in a House in Jerusalem (Possibly the Upper Room Where the Last Supper Was Held); Thomas was Absent:

*³⁶ While they were still talking about this, **Jesus himself stood among them** and said to them, “**Peace be with you.**” ³⁷ They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. ³⁸ He said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; **a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.**”*

⁴⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. ⁴¹ And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, “Do you have anything here to eat?” ⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³ and he took it and ate it in their presence. (Luke 24:36-43)

Commentary: Jesus’ body was not just a figment of the imagination or the appearance of a ghost—the disciples touched him, and he ate food. On the other hand, his body wasn’t merely a restored human body like Lazarus’s (John 11)—he was able to appear and disappear. Jesus’ resurrected body was immortal. This is the kind of body we will be given at the resurrection of the dead.

*¹⁹ On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the **doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them** and said, “Peace be with you!” ²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. ²¹ Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” ²² And with that **he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.** ²³ *If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.*”*

Jesus Appears to Thomas

²⁴ Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. ²⁵ So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.” (John 20:19-25)

Commentary: Jesus again identified himself with his Father. He told the disciples by whose authority he did his work. Then he passed the job to his disciples of spreading the gospel of salvation around the world. Whatever God has asked you to do, remember: 1) your authority come from God, and 2) Jesus has demonstrated by words and actions how to accomplish the job he has given you. As the Father sent Jesus, Jesus sends his followers.

The disciples may have received a special filling of the Holy Spirit—a foretaste of what all believers would experience from the time of Pentecost (Acts 2) and forever after. To do God’s work, we need the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit. We must avoid trying to do his work in our own strength.

There is life in the breath of God. Man was created but did not come alive until God breath into him the breath of life (**Genesis 2:7**). God’s first breath made man different from all other forms of creation. Now, through the breath of Jesus, god imparted eternal, spiritual life. With this inbreathing came the power to do God’s will on earth.

Jesus was giving the disciples their Spirit-powered and Spirit-guided mission—to preach the Good News about Jesus so people’s sins might be forgiven. The disciples did not have the power to forgive sins (only God can forgive sins), but Jesus gave them the privilege of telling new believers that their sins have been forgiven because they have accepted Jesus’ message. All believers have this same privilege. We can announce the forgiveness of sin with certainty when we ourselves find repentance and faith.

Have you ever wished you could actually see Jesus, touch him, and hear his words? Are there times you want to sit down with him and get his advice? Thomas wanted Jesus’ physical presence. But God’s plan is wiser. He has not limited himself to one physical body; he wants to be present with you at all times. Even now he is with you in the form of the Holy Spirit. You can talk to him, and you can find his words to you in the pages of the Bible. He can be as real to you as he was to Thomas.

6. A Week Later, To the Eleven Apostles, Including Thomas in a House:

²⁶ A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though **the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!"** ²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." ²⁸ Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹ Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

³⁰ **Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book.** ³¹ **But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.** (John 20:26-31)

¹⁴ Later Jesus **appeared to the Eleven** as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen. (Mark 16:14)

⁵ and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. (1 Corinthians 15:5)

Commentary: Jesus wasn't hard on Thomas for his doubts. Despite his skepticism, Thomas was still loyal to the believers and to Jesus himself. Some people need to doubt before they believe. If doubt leads to questions, questions lead to answers, and the answers are accepted, then doubt has done good work. It is when doubt becomes stubbornness and stubbornness becomes a life-style that doubt harms faith. When you doubt, don't stop here. Let your doubt deepen your faith as you continue to search for the answer.

Jesus' resurrected body was unique. It was not the same kind of flesh and blood Lazarus had when he came back to life. Jesus' body was no longer subject to the same laws of nature as before his death. He could appear in a locked room; yet he was not a ghost or apparition because he could be touched and could eat. Jesus' resurrection was literal and physical—he was not a disembodied spirit.

Some people think they would believe in Jesus if they could see a definite sign or miracle. But Jesus says we are blessed if we can believe without seeing. We have all the proof we need in the worlds of the Bible and the testimony of believers. A physical appearance would not make Jesus any more real to us than he is now.

To understand the life and mission of Jesus more fully, all we need to do is study the Gospels. John tells us that his Gospel records only a few of the many events in Jesus' life on earth. But the Gospel includes everything we need to know to believe that Jesus is Christ, the Son of God, through whom we receive eternal life.



March 26: Appearances By Jesus, Part 2—Continued ...

7. To Seven Disciples While Fishing:

¹ Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the Sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: ² Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. ³ “I’m going out to fish,” Simon Peter told them, and they said, “We’ll go with you.” So they went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing.

⁴ Early in the morning, Jesus stood on the shore, but the disciples did not realize that it was Jesus. ⁵ He called out to them, “Friends, haven’t you any fish?” “No,” they answered. ⁶ He said, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some.” When they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish.

⁷ Then the disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!” As soon as Simon Peter heard him say, “It is the Lord,” he wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water. ⁸ The other disciples followed in the boat, towing the net full of fish, for they were not far from shore, about a hundred yards. ⁹ When they landed, they saw a fire of burning coals there with fish on it, and some bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish you have just caught.”

¹¹ Simon Peter climbed aboard and dragged the net ashore. It was full of large fish, but even with so many the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” None of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. ¹³ Jesus came, took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish. ¹⁴ This was now the **third time Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.** (John 21:1-14)

Commentary: This chapter tells how Jesus commissioned Peter. Perhaps Peter needed special encouragement after his denial—he may have felt completely worthless. Verses 1-4 set the scene for Jesus’ conversation with Peter.

Only John (“the disciple whom Jesus loved”) recognized Jesus in the dim morning light, undoubtedly because Jesus had performed a similar miracle earlier (Luke 5:1-11).

8. To Eleven Disciples on the Mountain and The Great Commission

The Great Commission

¹⁶ Then the **eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go.** ¹⁷ When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸ Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore **go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in^a the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,** ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Mathew 28:16-20)

Commentary: Jesus’ resurrection was already causing a great stir in Jerusalem. A group of women was moving quickly through the streets, looking for the disciples to tell them the amazing news that Jesus was alive. At the same time, a group of religious leaders was plotting to cover up the resurrection.

God gave Jesus authority over heaven and earth. On the basis of that authority, Jesus told his disciples to make more disciples as they preached, baptized, and taught. With this same authority, **Jesus still commands us to tell others the Good News and make them disciples** for the kingdom.

When someone is dying or leaving us, his or her last words are very important. Jesus left the disciples with these last words of instruction:

- They were under his authority
- They were to make more disciples
- They were to baptize and teach the new disciples to obey Christ
- Christ would be with them always.

Whereas in previous missions Jesus had sent his disciples only to the Jews, their mission from now on would be worldwide. Jesus is Lord of the earth, and he died for the sins of people from all nations.

We are to go—whether it is next door or to another country—and make disciples. It is not an option, but a command to all who call Jesus “Lord”. We are not all evangelists in the formal sense, but we have all received gifts that we can use to help fulfill the Great Commission. As we obey, we have comfort in the knowledge that Jesus is always with us.

Jesus’ words affirm the reality of the Trinity. Some people accuse theologians of making up the concept of Trinity and reading it into the Scripture. As we see here, the **concept of Trinity comes directly from Jesus himself**. He did not say baptize them into the *names*, but into the *name* of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The word Trinity does not occur in Scripture, but it well describes the tree-in-one nature of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The disciples were to baptize people because baptism unites a believer with Jesus Christ in his or her death to sin and resurrection to new life. **Baptism symbolizes** submission to Christ, a willingness to live God’s way, and identification with God’s covenant people.

How is Jesus with us? Jesus was with the disciples physically until he ascended into heaven, and then spiritually through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit would be Jesus’ presence that would never leave them ([John 14:26](#)). Jesus continues to be with us today through his Spirit.

9. To a Crowd of 500:

*⁶ After that, he **appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep** ([1 Corinthians 15:6](#))*

Commentary: There will always be people who say that Jesus did not rise from the dead. Paul assures us that many people saw Jesus after his resurrection: Peter, the Twelve, more than 500 believers (most of whom were still alive when Paul wrote this), and James (Jesus’ brother). The resurrection is an historical fact! Don’t be discouraged by doubters who deny the resurrection. Be filled with hope because of the knowledge that one day you, and they, will see the living proof when Christ returns.

10. To Jesus’ Brother James:

*⁷ Then he **appeared to James, then to all the apostles,** ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. ([1 Corinthians 15:7](#))*

Commentary: This James is Jesus’ brother, who a first did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah ([John 7:5](#)). After seeing the resurrected Christ, he became a believer and ultimately a leader of the Church in Jerusalem ([Acts 15:13](#)). James wrote the New Testament book of James.

11. To Those Who Watched Jesus’ Accession on Mount of Olives:

*⁴⁴ He said to them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: **Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.**”*

*⁴⁵ Then he **opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.** ⁴⁶ He told them, “This is what is written: **The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day,** ⁴⁷ and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ **I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.**” ([Luke 24:44-49](#))*

Commentary: The Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms is a way to describe the entire Old Testament. In other words, the entire Old Testament points to the Messiah. For example, his role as prophet was foretold in Deuteronomy 18:15-20; his sufferings were prophesied in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53; his resurrection was predicted in Psalm 16:9-11 and Isaiah 53:10-11.

Jesus opened these people's minds to understand the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit does this in our lives today when we study the Bible. Have you ever wondered how to understand a difficult Bible passage? Besides reading surrounding passages, asking other people, and consulting reference works, pray that the Holy Spirit will open your mind to understand, giving you the needed insight to put God's Word into action in your life.

Luke wrote to the Greek-speaking world. He wanted them to know that Christ's message of God's love and forgiveness should go to all the world. We must never ignore the worldwide scope of Christ's gospel. God wants all the world to hear the Good News of salvation.

The Ascension

*⁵⁰ When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. ⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he left them and was **taken up into heaven**. ⁵² Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. ⁵³ And they stayed continually at the temple, praising God.*

(Luke 24:50-53)

Commentary: As the disciples stood and watched, Jesus began rising into the air, and soon he disappeared into heaven. Seeing Jesus leave must have been frightening, but the disciples knew that Jesus would keep his promise to be with them through the Holy Spirit. This same Jesus, who lived with the disciples, who died and was buried, and who rose from the dead, loves us and promises to be with us always. We can get to know him better through studying the Scriptures, praying, and allowing the Holy Spirit to make us more like Jesus.

Jesus' physical presence left the disciples when he returned to heaven, but the Holy Spirit soon came to comfort them and empower them to spread the gospel of salvation. Today Jesus' work of salvation is completed, and he is sitting at God's right hand, where he has authority over heaven and earth.

Luke's Gospel portrays Jesus as the perfect example of a life lived according to God's plan—as a child living in obedience to his parents and yet amazing the religious leaders in the temple, as an adult serving as a condemned man suffering without complaint. This emphasis was well suited to Luke's Greek audience, who placed high value on being an example and improving oneself, and who discussed the meaning of perfection. The Greeks, however, had a difficult time understanding the spiritual importance of the physical world. To help them understand God-man who united the spiritual and the physical Luke emphasized that Jesus was not a phantom human but a real human being who healed people and led them because he was concerned with their physical health as well as the state of their souls.

As believers living according to God's plan, we should obey our Lord in every detail as we seek to restore people's bodies and souls to the health and salvation God has in store for them. If we want to know how to live a perfect life, we can look to Jesus as our example.

*³ After his suffering, he **showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive**. He **appeared to them over a period of forty days** and spoke about the kingdom of God. ⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: **"Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about.** ⁵ For John baptized with^[a] water, but in a few days **you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.**"*

*⁶ So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" ⁷ He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But **you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.**"*

The Ascension

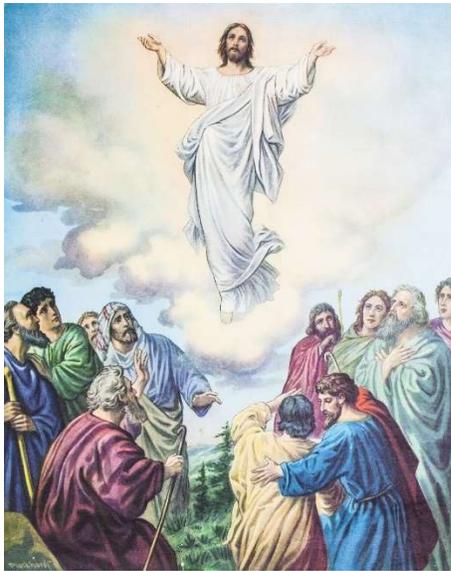
⁹ After he said this, **he was taken up before their very eyes**, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

¹⁰ They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. ¹¹ "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." (Acts 1:3-11)

Commentary: The Acts of the Apostles reports that for forty days after the Resurrection, Jesus continued to teach his followers. Jesus and the eleven were gathered near Mount Olivet, to the northeast of Bethany. Jesus tells his apostles that they will receive the power of the Holy Spirit, the "**Comforter**," and that they will spread his message the world over, i.e., the Great Commission. Jesus is taken up and received by a cloud. Two men clothed in white (i.e., angels) appear and tell the apostles that Jesus will return in the same manner as he was taken.

The *place* of the Ascension is not distinctly mentioned in the Gospel of Mark. Luke 24:50 states that the event took place in Bethany while it appears from Acts that it took place on the Mount Olivet (the "Mount of Olives"). After the Ascension the apostles are described as returning to Jerusalem from the mount that is called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, within a Sabbath day's journey. Tradition has consecrated this site as the Mount of Ascension.

Before the conversion of Constantine in 312 A.D., early Christians honored the Ascension of Christ in a *cave* on the Mount of Olives. By 384, the place of the Ascension was venerated on the present open site, uphill from the cave.



March 27 Appearances By Jesus, Part 3—After His Ascension

12. To Stephen When He Was Stoned:

The Stoning of Stephen

*⁵⁴ When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and **saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.** ⁵⁶ “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”*

*⁵⁷ At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses **laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.** (Acts 7:54-58)*

Commentary: Stephen saw the glory of God, and Jesus the Messiah standing at God’s right hand. Stephen’s words are similar to Jesus’ words spoken before the council (see Mathew 26:24; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:60). Stephen’s vision supported Jesus’ claim and angered the Jewish leaders who had condemned Jesus to death for blasphemy. They would not tolerate Stephen’s words, so they dragged him out and killed him. People may not kill us for witnessing about Christ (though in many parts of the world Christians are being killed for their beliefs) but they will let us know they don’t want to hear the truth and will often try to silence us. Keep honoring God in your conduct and words; though many may turn against you and your message, some will follow Christ. Remember, Stephen’s death made a profound impact on Paul, who later became the world’s greatest missionary. Even those who oppose you now may later turn to Christ.

13. To Paul (i.e., Saul) During His Conversion:

Saul’s Conversion

*¹ Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “**Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?**” ⁵ “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “**I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,**” he replied. (Acts 9:1-5)*

Commentary: Saul (later called Paul) was so zealous for his Jewish beliefs that he began a persecution campaign against anyone who believed Christ (“who belonged to the Way”). Why would the Jews in Jerusalem want to persecute Christians as far away as Damascus? There are several possibilities:

- To seize the Christians who had fled,
- To prevent the spread of Christianity to other major cities,
- To keep the Christians from causing any trouble with Rome,
- To advance Saul’s career and build reputation as a true Pharisee, zealous for the law,
- To unify the factions of Judaism by giving them a common enemy.

As Saul traveled to Damascus, pursuing Christians, he was confronted by the risen Christ and brought face to face with the truth of the gospel. **Sometimes God breaks into a life in a spectacular manner, and sometimes a conversion is a quiet experience.** Beware of people who insist that you must have a particular type of conversion experience. The right way to come to faith in Jesus is whatever way God brings you.

Damascus, a commercial city, was located about 175 northeast of Jerusalem in the Roman province of Syria. Several trade routes linked Damascus to other cities throughout the Roman world. Saul may have thought that by stamping out Christianity in Damascus, he could prevent its spread to other areas.

Paul refers to this experience as the start of his new life in Christ. At the center of this wonderful experience was Jesus Christ. Paul did not see a vision; he saw the risen Christ himself (9:17). Paul acknowledged Jesus as Lord, confessed his own sin, surrendered his life to Christ, and resolved to obey him. True conversion comes from a personal encounter with Jesus Christ and leads to a new life in relationship with him.

Paul thought he was pursuing heretics, but he was persecuting Jesus himself. Anyone who persecutes believers today is also guilty of persecuting Jesus ([Mathew 25:40-45](#)), because believers are the body of Christ on earth.

¹⁰ And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. ¹¹ Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them.

¹² “On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. ¹³ About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. ¹⁴ We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’

¹⁵ “Then I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ “ ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied.

[\(Acts 26:10-15\)](#)

Commentary: An oxgoad was a sharp stick used to prod cattle. “It is hard for you to kick the goads” means “You are only hurting yourself”.

⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. [\(1 Corinthians 15:8\)](#)

Commentary: Paul’s most important credential to be an apostle was that he was an eyewitness of the risen Christ ([Acts 9:3-6](#)). “Abnormally born” means that his was a special case. The other apostles saw Christ in the flesh. Paul was in the next generation of believers—yet Christ appeared to him.

14. To Apostle John On The Island of Patmos:

⁹ I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰ On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, ¹¹ which said: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.”

¹² I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and among the lampstands was someone “like a son of man,” dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴ His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. ¹⁵ His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. [\(Revelation 1:9-15\)](#)

Commentary: Patmos was a small rocky island in the Aegean Sea, about 50 miles offshore from the city of Ephesus on the Asia Minor seacoast.

The Christian church was facing severe persecution. Almost all believers were socially, politically, or economically suffering because of this empire-wide persecution, and some were even being killed for their faith. John was exiled to Patmos because he refused to stop preaching the gospel. We may not face persecution for our faith as the early Christians did, but even with our freedom few of us have the courage to share God’s Word with others. If we hesitate to share our faith during easy times, how will we do during times of persecution?

The seven golden lamp stands are the seven Churches in Asia ([1:11-20](#)), and Jesus stands among them. So matter what the churches face, Jesus protects them with his all-encompassing love and reassuring power. Through his Spirit, Christ is still among the churches today. When a church faces persecution, it should remember Christ’s deep love and compassion. When a church is wracked by internal strife and conflict, it should remember Christ’s concern for purity and his intolerance of sin.

This man “like a son of man” is Jesus himself. The title “Son of Man” occurs many times in the New Testament in reference to Jesus the Messiah. John recognized Jesus because he lived with him for three years and had seen him both as the Galilean preacher and as the glorified Son of God as the transfiguration ([Mathew 17:1-8](#)). Here Jesus appears as the mighty Son of Man. His white hair indicates his wisdom and divine nature; his blazing eyes symbolize judgment of all evil; the golden sash around his chest reveal him as the high priest who goes into God’s presence to obtain forgiveness of sin for those who have believed in him.

Finally consider that there were numerous sightings of Jesus—not merely a fleeting observance of a shadowy figure by one or two people. There were multiple appearances to numerous people, several of which were confirmed in more than one gospel.

Consider the conclusion of scholar John Drane:

“The earliest evidence we have for the resurrection almost certainly goes back to the time immediately after the resurrection event is alleged to have taken place. This is the evidence contained in the early sermons in the Acts of the Apostles...There can be no doubt that in the first few chapters of Acts, its author has preserved material from very early sources.” [John Drane. *Introducing the New Testament*, Harpor and Row, 1986, page 99]

The early Christians did not just endorse Jesus’ teaching; they were convinced they had seen him alive after his crucifixion. THAT is what changed their lives and started the church.

But what about critics who attempt to dismiss the appearances as hallucinations? Consider that

“hallucinations are individual occurrences. By their very nature only one person can see a given hallucination at a time. They certainly aren’t something which can be seen by a group of people. Neither is it possible that one person could somehow induce a hallucination in somebody else. Since a hallucination exists only in this subjective, personal sense, it is obvious that other cannot witness it.” [Cary Collins. *Psychologist*.]

Yet the Gospels and Book of Acts record repeated accounts of Jesus appearing to multiple people who reported the same thing.

Spiritual Nugget #14

We are not defined by our thoughts or feelings.

Who we become depends more on our values and actions.

Ideas and emotions are expressions of evolving states of mind.

Ideals and behaviors are symbols of enduring character.

Our identities are forged through the choices we make.

It’s not what happens to us, but how we react that defines who we are.

March 28: Historical Perspective on Maundy Thursday



Maundy Thursday (also referred to as "Holy Thursday" or "Shrove Thursday") commemorates the Last Supper shared by Christ with his disciples thereby instituting the Lord's Supper (also known as Communion or the Eucharist). The name of "Maundy" comes from the Latin word *mandatum*, meaning "command." This stems from Christ's words, *"A new command I give you: Love one another."*

³⁰ As soon as Judas had taken the bread, he went out. And it was night. ³¹ When he was gone, Jesus said, "Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. ³² If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once. ³³ "My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come. ³⁴ "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." (John 13:34)

At the Last Supper, Jesus also washed the disciples' feet as an act of humility and service, thereby setting an example that we should love and serve one another in humility.

³ Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; ⁴ so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ⁵ After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. ⁶ He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?" ⁷ Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand." ⁸ "No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." ⁹ "Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!" ¹⁰ Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you." ¹¹ For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not everyone was clean. ¹² When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. ¹³ "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶ Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them. (John 13:3-17).

Some Christian churches observe a foot-washing ceremony on Maundy Thursday to commemorate Jesus' washing the feet of the disciples.

The Last Supper took place in "the upper room" of the house believed to have been owned by John Mark and his mother, Mary [Acts 12:12]. This room, also the site of the Pentecost, is known as the "Coenaculum" or the "Cenacle" and is referred to as "Holy and glorious Sion, mother of all churches". A Christian church, a basilica, was built in the 4th century on the site of this place. It was destroyed by Muslims and later re-built by the Crusaders. Underneath the place is the tomb of David.

After the Supper, Jesus went outside the Old City of Jerusalem, crossed the Kidron Valley, and came to the Garden of Gethsemane, a place whose name means "Olive Press," and where olives still grow today. There He suffered in three ineffable ways: He knew exactly what would befall Him physically and mentally -- every stroke, every thorn in the crown He would wear, every labored breath He would try to take while hanging on the Cross, the pain in each glance at His mother; He knew that He was taking on all the sins of the world -- all the sins that had ever been or ever will be committed; and, finally, He knew that, for some people, this Sacrifice would not be fruitful because they would reject Him. Here He was let down by His Apostles when they fell asleep instead of keeping watch, here is where He was further betrayed by Judas with a kiss, and where He was seized by "a great multitude with swords and clubs, sent from the chief Priests and the ancients of the people" and taken before Caiaphas, the high priest, where he was accused of blasphemy, beaten, spat upon, and prepared to be taken to Pontius Pilate tomorrow morning.

A Maundy Thursday Devotion

Wash me clean Lord.

I want to receive all you have for me.

I am blessed and honored when you serve me;

I am humbled by your humility.

Help me remember your healing and cleansing.

Don't let me forget my salvation.

In darkness help me call on your name, Jesus.

In darkness, be the light of my heart;

May I never be afraid!

I am longing for your sunrise, Jesus.

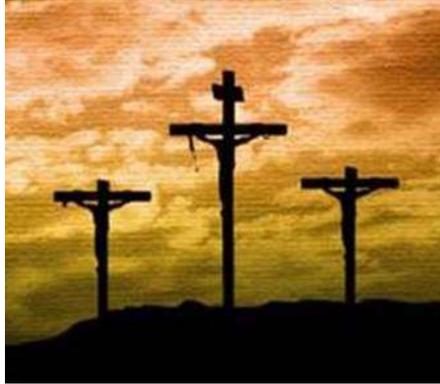
In your mercy, give me the gift of hope.

And by your love, help me to love others.

Teach me your way in the coming days.

Help me to understand how you have loved me,
and how you love me still.

March 29: Historical Perspective on Good Friday



Good Friday is the Friday that immediately precedes Easter Sunday. It is celebrated traditionally as the day on which Jesus was crucified, died and buried.

Why is Good Friday referred to as “good”? What the Jewish authorities and Romans did to Jesus was definitely not good [Matthew chapters 26-27]. However, the results of Christ’s death are very good! [Romans 5:8](#), “*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” First [Peter 3:18](#) tells us, “*For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit.*”

Many Christian churches celebrate Good Friday with a subdued service, usually in the evening, in which Christ’s death is remembered with solemn hymns, prayers of thanksgiving, a message centered on Christ suffering for our sakes, and observance of the Lord’s Supper.

Should Christians remember Jesus’ death by celebrating Good Friday? The Bible does not instruct Christians to remember Christ’s death by honoring a certain day. The Bible does give us freedom in these matters, however. [Romans 14:5](#) tells us, “*One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.*” Rather than remembering Christ’s death on a certain day, once a year, the Bible instructs us to remember Christ’s death by observing the Lord’s Supper. [First Corinthians 11:24-26](#) declares, “*...do this in remembrance of me...for whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.*”

Whether or not Christians choose to “celebrate” Good Friday, the events of that day should be ever on our minds because the death of Christ on the cross is the paramount event of the Christian faith.

A Good Friday Devotion

Merciful Father,
Today we remember how your son died on the cross for us.
He suffered betrayal, humiliation, and mockery for our sake.
He was beaten and wounded for our sins.
He was crowned with thorns and crucified so that we may be saved.
Our hearts are heavy as we remember his sufferings.
Though we mourn today, we find comfort in the hope that his death and resurrection brought to us.
Because he died, we have the gift of eternal life.
Thank you Father for this ultimate demonstration of love.
Thank you for the gift of eternal life.
Thank you for the forgiveness of our sins through Jesus Christ—our Lord and Savior.

March 30: The Role of Music in Worship

Spiritual Nugget #15

*“When we sing, we pray twice.
When the music is prayerful, and united with the focus of the liturgy,
it invokes the power of the Holy Spirit.
When that happens, it can melt the hardest of hearts and
it can help to prepare the congregation to receive Christ...” **Saint Augustine***

A worship service typically is designed around a common set of elements organized into four major phases of worship: *Gathering*—coming together as a community and preparing ourselves to hear God’s message; the *Proclaiming* of God’s message, our *Responding* to God’s message; and *Sending us out* into the world to live God’s message. This article will examine the **role and importance of music** in a worship service.

Consider the following quote by Patrick McNamara, Boston University School of medicine,

“...when language evolved, it not only improved communication between people, it also... allowed them to obfuscate and lie. People need to find a more trustworthy means of communicating—a mode that could not lie or be faked. The solution to the problem of the lie made possible by language was music. ... We let into our hearts and minds because we are designed to trust it as a message that cannot be faked.”

The neurological explanation of music’s power suggested by Dr. McNamara in the quotation above goes a long way toward explaining stories like those of Martin Luther, and perhaps like our own. It was said of Luther that his hymns caused more people to embrace the ideas of the Reformation than any of his theological treaties did. Similarly today, don’t we let music into our hearts our minds, tending to trust it more than we trust sermons, lectures, sales pitches, political speeches and the mainstream press in today’s culture?

Isn’t it the trustworthiness of music that, for example, encourages advertisers to use music to sell products? Since commercials cost a lot of money, presumably the effectiveness of music has been well proven. While we might well distrust the words of a commercial, the words are set to a tune that we like. Consequently, we let the words enter our mind and heart because they come to us musically. Of course, isn’t the same effect true of worship music? Doesn’t music help us trust the message—particularly when the words are grounded in the Scripture?

Obviously the trustworthiness of music puts a great deal of responsibility on the writers of the lyrics! If our hearts and minds are inclined to trust music, clearly it matters if the words are trustworthy, since when we sing, the words will enter our hearts and minds that have been opened by music.

Singing is one of the most emotive ways human beings can communicate our thoughts and feelings. From the joy of a love song to the grief of a funeral hymn, ***songs move people in a way that mere spoken words can’t***. Therefore it is natural that music is one of the powerful ways in which we express ourselves in a worship service. Music is woven through out a typical Sunday worship service in various forms such as prelude, postlude, choir anthem, offertory response and hymns. Additional music is typically included during special seasons such as Easter and Christmas along with special events like baptisms.

Yet while music provides a powerful way to express the feelings of our hearts, music can also be one of the most controversial, divisive elements of worship—causing conflict rather than enhancing the worship experience. Why? Music differs not only between cultures, but also between sub-cultures such as youth and older people in the same congregation. So sometimes we get "worship wars" based on different music styles. *While both sides have valid perspectives, the purpose for music during the worship service is not open for argument. The **purpose of the music and singing is clear—to praise and worship the Lord** lifting our thoughts and emotions to God regardless of the music style.*

Come, **let us sing for joy to the LORD**; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. ² Let us come before him with thanksgiving and **extol him with music and song**. (Psalm 95:1-2)

So what does the Bible tell us about music?

- Music has been at the heart of creation from the beginning of time, and has been the inescapable emotional response to God's goodness? When God laid the foundations of the earth, "*all the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy.*"

while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy? (Job 38:7)

- Music is one of God's good gifts and every good gift comes from God.

¹⁶ Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. ¹⁷ **Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father** of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. ¹⁸ He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created. (James 1:17)

- Gift of music-making was given by God.

²⁰ Adah gave birth to Jabal; he was the father of those who live in tents and raise livestock. ²¹ His brother's name was **Jubal; he was the father of all who play stringed instruments and pipes**. ²² Zillah also had a son, Tubal-Cain, who forged all kinds of tools out of bronze and iron... (Genesis 4:21)

- God desires that we "sing ... with grateful praise" and with understanding.

*For God is the King of all the earth; **sing to him a psalm of praise**.* (Psalm 47:7)

Sing to the LORD with grateful praise; make music to our God on the harp. (Psalm 147:7).

¹⁴ For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. ¹⁵ So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also **sing with my understanding**. (1 Corinthians 14:14-15)

- We are exhorted to "play skillfully and shout for joy".

*Sing to him a new song; **play skillfully**, and **shout for joy**.* (Psalm 33:3)

Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, **burst into jubilant song with music**; (Psalm 98:4).

In the Old Testament, when King David established the Levitical music ministry in the tabernacle, he appointed 288 singers and musicians "to play loudly on musical instruments, on harps and lyres and cymbals, to raise sounds of joy" to help his people express the joy of knowing the Lord was their God, and all he had done for them.

¹⁶ David told the leaders of the Levites to **appoint their fellow Levites as musicians to make a joyful sound with musical instruments: lyres, harps and cymbals**. (1 Chronicles 15:16)

⁷ Along with their relatives—all of **them trained and skilled in music** for the LORD—they **numbered 288**. (1 Chronicles 25:7)

In the New Testament God gave us a model for corporate worship including an instruction to sing: “Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.”

¹² Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. ¹³ Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. ¹⁴ And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. ¹⁵ Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. ¹⁶ **Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.** ¹⁷ And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:12-17)

Believers are exhorted to “... be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms [a sacred worship song directed to the Lord in response to His great love] and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.”

¹⁸ Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, **be filled with the Spirit,** ¹⁹ **speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord,** (Ephesians 5:18-19)

Believers sang worship songs to the Lord.

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and **singing hymns to God,** and the other prisoners were listening to them. (Acts 16:25).

¹³ Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? **Let them sing songs of praise.** (James 5:13).

Good songs:

- Have lyrics that touch us deeply like great poetry.
- Can fill our eyes with tears, or cause us to raise our hands with joy lifting the lyrics off the song sheet and into our hearts!
- Help us respond emotionally to God as we sing of God’s works, give him thanks and praise, and encourage one another to live for him.

Indeed, Saint Augustine said,

“When we sing, we pray twice. When the music is prayerful, and united with the focus of the liturgy, it invokes the power of the Holy Spirit. When that happens, it can melt the hardest of hearts and it can help to prepare the congregation to received Christ...”

So what does it mean for music to be faithful to God’s purpose during a worship service? While it might be tempting to sing a song that is a favorite of either the musicians or the congregation, the song should be appropriate for the season of the liturgical year and the lyrics of songs should support the message of the scripture readings and the pastor’s message. **Songs should help focus the congregation on God.**

¹³ ***The trumpeters and musicians joined in unison to give praise and thanks to the LORD. Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals and other instruments, the singers raised their voices in praise to the LORD and sang: “He is good; his love endures forever.” Then the temple of the LORD was filled with the cloud, (2 Chronicles 5:13)***

⁵ ***May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had,*** ⁶ ***so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 15:6).***

The lyrics of the songs selected should match God’s purpose for music at church—faithful lyrics that move us and speak to whom we are as humans under God, proclaiming God’s works, giving God thanks and praise, and encouraging us to give our lives to God.

⁷ Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the pipe or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? ⁸ Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? ⁹ So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. **(1 Corinthians 14:7-9)**

¹⁴ For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. ¹⁵ So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also **sing with my understanding.** **(1 Corinthians 14:14-15)**

¹⁶ Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you **teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit**, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. **(Colossians 3:16)**

¹² In a loud voice they were saying: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" ¹³ Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" **(Revelation 5:12-13)**

Finally, while we typically find the voice to be the primary instrument of song in the Scriptures, *dance* and *instrumentals* were also used to express praise to our Creator: "praise His name with the dance; let them sing praises to Him with the timbrel and harp"

Let them praise his name with dancing and make music to him with timbrel and harp. (Psalm 149:3).

Sources:

- 1) Lisa Hickman, *The Worshiping Life*, Westminster John Know Press, 2005, pages 22-26, 89-94, 143-147.
- 2) Ross Langmead, "Music in Worship", School of Ministry, Whitley College, 28 June 2005.
- 3) Pastor Bruce Benson, *Sing for Joy Cover Letter*, July 2016.

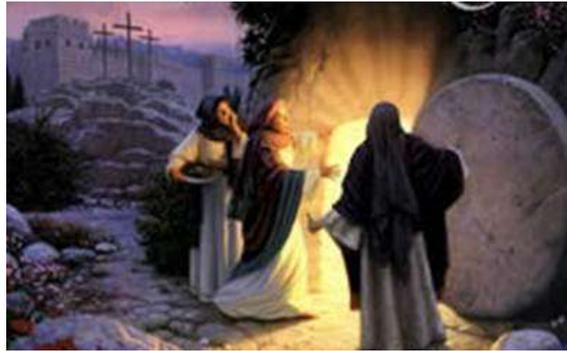
Spiritual Nugget #16

*The purpose of music and singing in worship service is clear,
to praise and worship the Lord.*

Spiritual Nugget #17

Songs move people in a way that mere spoken words can't!

March 31: Historical Perspective on Easter



The Biblical Accounts:

Easter (also known as Resurrection Day), is the event upon which the entire Christian faith hinges. Paul, once a Jewish leader hostile to Christians, became a convert when he met Jesus on the Road to Damascus [Acts 9]. As an eyewitness of Christ, Paul made it abundantly clear that **without the resurrection, there is no basis for faith in Christ:**

¹² But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. (1 Corinthians 15:12-14)

When Christ was born, He fulfilled a number of Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. By the time of His crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, it is estimated that He had fulfilled more than 300 of them. These numbers alone provide staggering amount of evidence that Jesus Christ was the promised Messiah. So it is with good reason that Christians the world over regard Easter as a very special event.

Christ Revealed in the Jewish Passover:

In the early days of the church, most Christians were Jewish converts. Because Jesus was crucified and rose again during the Passover season, their celebration of Christ's resurrection was acknowledged during that annual observance of the deliverance from bondage in Egypt. Christian Jews (or Messianic Jews) consider the Passover to be symbolic of the time when Christ set all believers free from the penalty of sin (through His death on the cross) and death (through His resurrection from the dead).

Therefore, the origin of Easter can be traced to the Jewish Passover ceremony itself. Christian scholars believe that the Old Testament is Christ concealed, while the New Testament is Christ revealed. Let's hold the elements of the Passover up to the light of the life of Christ. By tradition, the lamb to be sacrificed during the Passover was selected four days before the sacrifice was to be made. Jesus rode into Jerusalem four days before He was crucified. The lamb was customarily slain at 3 p.m. on Passover. Jesus uttered the words "*it is finished*" and died on the cross at 3 p.m. (this is known traditionally as Good Friday.) The festival of Unleavened Bread began at sunset. One of the rituals involved the sacrifice of a grain offering, representing the first fruits of the harvest. Jesus, according to the Apostle Paul, became the first fruits of those raised from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:20).

During the Passover dinner, three matzahs (i.e., When the Jews were leaving Egypt, there was no time for the bread to rise, and the resulting food was matzah—an unleavened bread that is the "official" food of Passover.) are put together. Christians see these matzahs as representative of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The middle matzah is broken, as Christ said at the Last Supper, "*This is My body, broken for you.*" The middle matzah is also striped and pierced, as Jesus was during His crucifixion, and as was prophesied in Isaiah 53:5, Psalm 22:16 and Zechariah 12:10. This matzah is then wrapped in a white cloth and hidden, just as Christ was wrapped in linen and laid in the tomb.

An Easter Devotion



Blest are you, Lord Jesus who came to us a little child
one of us, flesh and blood to share in our humanity.

Blest are you, Lord Jesus who came to us as carpenter
and yet in whose creative hands a world was fashioned.

Blest are you, Lord Jesus who came to us as fisherman
and yet pointed to a harvest that was yet to come.

Blest are you, Lord Jesus who came to us as teacher
and opened eyes to truths that only the poor could understand.

Blest are you, Lord Jesus who came to us as healer
and opened hearts to the reality of wholeness.

Blest are you, Lord Jesus who came to us as prophet, priest and king
and yet humbled himself to take our place upon the cross.

Blest are you, Lord Jesus who came to us as servant
and revealed to us the extent of his Father's love for human kind.

Blest are you, Lord Jesus, who rose from the ignominy of a sinner's death
to the triumph of a Saviour's resurrection

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son
for the sake of me and you and other sinners too.
Blest are you Lord Jesus, our Saviour and Redeemer. Amen

April 1: Showing Gratitude Through Your Gifts of Time, Talent & Treasure



There are countless ways to make a difference and give back to our church and community. A simple, time-tested framework for discussing “giving” is built on the concept of stewardship and its three components—the gifts of time, talent and treasure.

Since the purpose of Lenten Season is to reflect on our faith journey we are concluding this Lenten Booklet with a reflection of showing your gratitude through your gifts of *time, talent and treasure* to help our church and community.

Time. *Time may be the most valuable resource we all have.* St. Francis of Assisi once noted that our time begins at birth and ends with death. For most people, it is about 25,000 days. Time is precious and once lost, can never be regained. By donating your personal time to helping others, you are sharing your most valuable resource for the glory of God.

Studies have also shown that giving of personal time is also important to our own well-being. It provides a foundation to our purpose for living and helping others. Giving time contributes to our individual well-being by:

- Giving us a new perception of the value of time,
- Helping us understand that service of time is empowering,
- Helping people connect and engage with like-minded people,
- Giving people happiness.

Also, by understanding the importance of time’s value, people are more likely to make better choices and receive greater gratification from their volunteer service.

In fact, research by the Stanford Graduate School of Business shows that helping others makes you feel like you have more time and referenced Psychological Science, which pointed out individuals helping others have increased feelings of “*time affluence*” as they feel their volunteer service time has greater value than spending time on personal self. In addition, studies have shown that when people complete several tasks and responsibilities for others, they are happier and feel less time constrained. **Time is valuable and is worth more when used for the greater good.**

Talent. Each person in the world has unique *talents* and abilities that makes them special. What people can offer to the world can be motivation, inspiration and encouragement to others. Consider that talent is given to everyone not only for their personal use, but also to enrich the lives of others? Are not gifts meant to be shared with others? Consider what the Apostle Paul says in his letters to the Romans and Corinthians regarding Spirit-given talents and gifts:

³For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. ⁴For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. ⁶We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; ⁷if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; ⁸if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully. (Romans 12:3-8)

⁷Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. (1 Corinthians 12:7)

Also, consider that your special gift of **talent is the only unique gift you can give for the benefit of others**. It's not only rewarding to donate your talent, but also highly valued because it provides a service or expertise that is often out of reach for the recipients.

An article by Thrive Global provides six inspiring reasons why you should consider sharing your talents:

1. Can benefit other people.
2. May positively change the lives of other people.
3. Can lead to a more satisfying personal life.
4. Can leave a lasting impression on people.
5. Can lead to faster growth and development [and sustainability].
6. Can show appreciation to the giver.

People typically volunteer their time and talent for charitable organizations because they are passionate about a particular cause.

Treasure. When many people think of generosity, they typically think of donating their treasure—a euphemism for money or other items with value. Americans gave a record \$471 billion to charity in 2020, according to the annual Giving USA report, despite the coronavirus pandemic, job losses and racial justice issues. But why do people give of their treasure? Recent research provides evidence that people are biologically programmed to be altruistic to some degree.

As a Christian, does not **sharing your treasure demonstrate your gratitude to God for the blessings and gifts bestowed to you?** In fact, studies have shown that both giving and receiving “treasure” triggers the brain’s dopamine-rich reward system.

Summary. People typically experience a stronger sense of reward when they witness the positive impact of their gifts. Psychologists call this the “helper’s high.” There is also a connection between empathy and altruism. Volunteerism provides greater happiness and better physical and mental health. Generosity is a wonderful behavioral activity that provides wonderful feelings from positive behaviors.

The spirit of giving *time, talent and treasure* is important to the long-term success and sustainability of St. John’s. What inspires people to act selflessly, to help others, and to make personal sacrifices? The Greek philosopher Aristotle said, “*What is the essence of life? To serve others and do good?*”

Spiritual Nugget #18

*The Greek philosopher Aristotle said,
“What is the essence of life? To serve others and do good.”*

Spiritual Nugget #19

Time may be the most valuable resource we all have and once lost, can never be regained.

Spiritual Nugget #20

Talent is the only unique gift you can give for the benefit of others.

St. John's Future Together

The Strategic Plan

Vision:

We are called to love, to learn and to witness in Christ as a congregation that welcomes everyone, and seeks service that will advance God's realm on earth.

Mission:

The mission of St. John's UCC is to grow in love of God and neighbor.

Focus:

THEME	DESCRIPTION
Spiritual Deepening	Establish conventional and unconventional resources for healing, connection, faith formation, and increased spiritual growth.
Energize Participation	Encourage personal involvement in the life, mission, and ministry of the church.
Community Engagement	Develop strong partnerships to fulfill our call to serve and support the wider community.
Congregational Care	Promote a loving and caring culture to ensure a healthy and supportive congregation.
Financial Sustainability	Create opportunities to invest in the future and ministry of the church.

*The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.*

