

Lenten Devotions

The Making of a Leader: Peter

February 26 —April 11, 2020

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Introduction

Several years ago, our Thursday Afternoon Ladies Bible Study did an intense study of the 12 disciples using as our guide an amazing book called *Twelve Ordinary Men* by John MacArthur. Over the years, these men have been elevated to a place of honor, but when Jesus called them, they were ordinary men — some fishermen, a tax collector, a political zealot, and some whom we only know by name. They were not religious leaders. Most were unlearned men with little education. Every one of them heard the call from Jesus to follow Him and in turn left everything to become a disciple or learner of this amazing Teacher.

In the autumn of 2019, the Lord laid a challenge on my heart to begin a study of the life of one of these 12 men — the Apostle Peter. When we are first introduced to Peter, we find a brash, burly fisherman who did not mince words. He was outspoken, impetuous, impulsive, and a man of extremes. One minute he would gladly proclaim that Christ was the Son of the Living God, and yet in the very next breath, he would tell Jesus that He, Jesus, did not know what He was talking about.

Indeed, Peter was a man of extremes, but he left everything to follow Jesus and to be taught and trained by Him. The time that Peter would spend under Jesus' tutelage would prove invaluable in shaping and molding Peter into an individual that would be mightily used by God. It did not come without a cost, though, and it certainly didn't come without some painful experiences, but in the end, Peter would become a man whom God could and would use in a powerful way in the early church.

This year's Lenten devotional will focus on how God can take a man like Peter and shape him into a powerful leader. As you read these devotional thoughts, I would encourage you to ask the Lord to likewise work in your heart and life and shape you and mold you into a person that God can use in even greater ways. This is not an exhaustive study by any means. The focus is on incidents in the Gospel accounts and the book of Acts that highlight Peter's life along with lessons that we can learn from this man of God. I had hoped to include devotional thoughts relating to 1 and 2 Peter, but there just is not enough room. That will be a study for another time.

May God bless you and guide you as you journey through this Lenten season and this Lenten devotional!

Wednesday, February 26, 2020

Read: John 1:35-42.

Introduced to Jesus

John 1:41-42 — “The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus.”

Think with me for a moment. Who first introduced you to Jesus? Was it your mom or dad who first introduced you to Jesus as you sat on their knee and listened to stories of Jesus? Or was it a Sunday School teacher who first regaled you with stories of Jesus loving and accepting the little children? Was it a pastor or other church leader whose passion for Jesus opened your eyes and heart to precious truths about the Savior? Or was it a friend who daily sought to live out his or her faith before you that won your heart to the Lord? Indeed, who was it that first introduced you to Jesus?

Now I grew up in Sunday School and in the church, but the defining moment for me took place in 1977 when Pat, a lady from our church who had recently found the Lord, convinced me to go with her to a camp-meeting service in West Chazy. The speaker that night was Dr. Norman Wilson, renowned speaker from the radio broadcast The Wesleyan Hour. As he preached on The Basic Questions we all ask ourselves, my hungry heart hung on to his every word. When the sermon was over and the altar call was given, I made my way to the altar where I met Jesus for myself.

As we read in John’s Gospel account, John the Baptist was with two of his disciples or followers. When he saw Jesus passing by, he proclaimed, “Look, the Lamb of God.” Those two men immediately left John’s company and started following Jesus. In fact, they ended up spending the day with Him. One of those two was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. This account records that the very first thing Andrew did was go and find his brother Simon and tell him that he had found the Messiah. Andrew was so excited about His encounter with Jesus, and so convinced that Jesus was indeed the promised Messiah, that he took his brother to meet Jesus for himself. That introduction to Jesus would change Simon’s life forever.

As we enter into this Lenten season, I would encourage you to pause and take a moment to thank God for the individual or individuals who introduced you to Jesus. I would also encourage you to ask God who He wants you to introduce to Jesus during this season.

Thursday, February 27, 2020

A New Name

John 1:42 — “And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas’ (which, when translated, is Peter).”

Have you ever called somebody by the wrong name? Have you ever had somebody else call you by the wrong name? It’s so easy to do. Some of us aren’t good with names. At other times, we meet somebody that looks like somebody else we know and call them by that other person’s name. Then there are times we give people a nickname — for example “Red” for their red hair or “Shorty” for their short stature.

Let me make one thing clear here today. When Jesus called Simon “Cephas” in Aramaic or “Peter” in Greek, that was no accident. The name “Peter” meant “rock.” When you hear the word “rock,” what comes to your mind? What do you think of? A rock is hard, solid, stable, and immovable. It isn’t easily moved or destroyed. Was Simon a rock? Was he solid? Stable? Steadfast? Not at all! So why would Jesus, in giving Simon a new name, give him a name that didn’t seem to fit his personality or way of life? Why would he give him a name that meant “Rock” when it was obvious that he was certainly not solid as a rock?

Jesus was ultimately calling Peter to leave his old way of life and living to pursue a new way of life and living. He was calling Peter to come to Him, follow Him, learn from Him, and, yes, even be changed by Him. Jesus saw beyond the rough exterior of that burly fisherman to a heart that could be molded and shaped into the kind of person that would live for Him and would learn to serve Him. Where others saw impulsiveness or brashness, Jesus saw potential. He not only saw what Peter was; He saw what Peter could and would become. He not only saw a fisherman; He saw one who would gain a passion for people and become a “fisher of men.” Jesus wasn’t looking for perfection. He was looking for someone He could mold, shape, train, equip and use for the building of His kingdom. That new name was just the start and would symbolize the beginning of a new life.

Just think, when Jesus called you and me, He knew us. He knew my past. He knew my sins. He knew my struggles. Not only that, He saw beyond those to my potential. He saw who I could become because of His love and grace at work in my heart and life. Not only that, He knew you. He knew your past. He knew your sins. He knew your struggles. But He also knew and saw your potential and who and what you could become because of His love and grace at work in your life. I would encourage you today to take a moment to celebrate God’s work in your heart and life.

Friday, February 28, 2020

**Read Mark 1:14-20.
A Call to Follow**

Mark 1:17 — “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.”

Most of us grew up playing a childhood game known as follow the leader. One child would be designated as the leader, and the rest of the children would line up behind him or her. The idea of the game was to follow the leader and mimic the leader’s actions, movements, and path. The leader would lead the rest of the children through all kinds of antics, and the other children would have to follow suit. Whoever did not do as the leader did would be out of the game.

That day when Jesus was walking along the shoreline and called Peter, Andrew, James, and John to leave everything and follow Him, He wasn’t inviting them to join Him in a child’s game of follow the leader. No, He wanted them to leave their occupations and their livelihoods behind and follow Him. He was essentially calling them to leave a life of fishing for fish which fed men’s bodies and met physical needs, to a life of fishing for men which would meet far more important needs — spiritual needs. In preparation for that work, Jesus had some important lessons for them to learn, and they could only learn them as they were taught by Him and learned to follow Him in complete trust.

What all would have been involved in following Jesus? In essence, Jesus was calling them to make a commitment to a lifestyle of learning and living under a Master — the Master. They would have to learn to live as He lived, walk in His footsteps, and become like Him in every way. They would have to learn trust and obedience. There would be times when they would have to trust Him even though they could not understand what He was asking them to do. There would be times when they would be challenged to obey Him even though they could not see the outcome, or even when what He was asking of them did not make any sense on a human level. They would be called to live by faith — absolute and utmost faith.

Years ago, I heard somebody share the thought that a leader learns to lead by first learning how to follow. Ultimately that was what Jesus was seeking to accomplish as He taught and trained His disciples. He was teaching them how to follow Him so that later on they could become leaders in His kingdom.

Jesus asks no less of us. His desire is that we learn from Him as He leads us in His ways. We need to commit ourselves to follow Him, walk with Him by faith, trust Him and obey Him. Will you commit yourself to that kind of a lifestyle? Will you become a follower of Jesus?

Saturday, February 29, 2020

A Special Calling

Luke 6:12-13 — “One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and

spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles.”

When I was about 17 years old, I received what I considered a special calling from the Lord. I was going through those difficult teenage years and struggled tremendously with depression, feelings of self-loathing and failure, and confusion about the direction my life should take. One Sunday morning as we were waiting for a ride to church, I opened my great-grandmother’s little New Testament and very candidly asked the Lord what He wanted me to do with my crazy, mixed-up life. I opened up that little New Testament to Matthew 28:16-20 — the passage known as the Great Commission. I could almost hear the voice of God read those words to me and challenge my heart. I *knew* that God was calling me to spend my life serving Him in full-time ministry.

That word “calling” is an interesting word, isn’t it? A calling is much more than choosing a vocation or area of employment. In the Biblical sense it denotes God’s work in the lives of His people. He calls us to follow Him in every area of our lives. That call to follow Christ is at the root of every other calling. Likewise, He calls us to repentance — to confess our sins, receive His forgiveness, and live changed lives. He calls us to belong to Him and enjoy a close relationship with Him. He calls us to live holy lives. He even calls individuals to serve Him in various areas of Christian ministry.

It seems important to take a few moments to differentiate two specific aspects of the calling that Peter and the others received. They were called to be disciples of Jesus. They were also called to be apostles. What is the difference between disciples and apostles?

In first century Judaism, a disciple would leave his home and his occupation and move in with his teacher. He would serve the teacher and would trust the teacher as an absolute authority. A disciple was expected to learn from the teacher and seek to become like him in every way. In return, the teacher or rabbi would provide housing and food for the disciple. From out of all who came to Him, Jesus specifically chose the 12 whom He would teach and train to carry on His work.

The title “apostle” means sent out ones. An apostle would learn from a master or teacher and would then be sent out under his authority to continue the work of the master or teacher. Jesus trained the 12 as Apostles and sent them out under His authority to teach, to heal, and to drive out demons. (Mark 3:4-19; Matthew 10:1-4)

The twelve would be taught by Jesus and equipped to go out and do His work both as disciples and as apostles. It was indeed quite a calling that had been placed on these lives.

Sunday, March 1, 2020

Fishers of Men

Mark 1:17 — “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.”

Fish was a food staple throughout the Roman Empire during Jesus’ day. Few

people could afford beef or lamb; however, they could afford fish. Wealthy people ate fresh fish.

Adam Hamilton, in his book *Simon Peter: Flawed but Faithful Disciple* described three different methods of fishing that were utilized in the first-century. The first method was the line and hook method which was a common method of catching fish. However, it wasn't practical or profitable for the fishermen of that day to rely on that method of catching one fish at a time. The second method was casting nets from the shoreline. This was more profitable as it allowed them to catch numerous fish at the same time. Hamilton described the third and main method as follows: "But the method most often used by crews of professional fishermen in the first century was called dragnet or seine fishing. In this type of fishing, two boats might work together, lowering a large net into the water, fishermen in each boat holding on to the end of the net. The boats would row forward, spreading apart some distance and catching large numbers of a variety of fish in the nets, then the boats would come together and the nets, hopefully filled with fish, would be hauled into one boat or the other." (p. 23) Both the second and third method of fishing required brute strength of the fishermen.

Four of the men Jesus called to follow him were fishermen. They were Peter and Andrew (one set of brothers) and James and John (another set of brothers). They were strong, burly men used to hard work. No doubt strong arm muscles and calloused hands characterized these men. Jesus not only called them to follow Him as disciples and apostles, but He challenged them to follow Him and He would make them "fishers of men." What did that mean? Were they to catch men like they caught fish — with hook and line or with nets? Not at all!

Jesus was calling His disciples first of all to follow Him, learn from Him, and walk in His ways. He would teach them, equip them, and instill within them a love and a passion for the people around them. Yes the people of that day were no different than people today. Yes, they needed food to nourish their bodies. Their greatest need, however, was what Jesus could do in their hearts and lives. They needed Jesus in their hearts and lives to bring them grace, forgiveness, healing, and the hope of eternal life. Jesus would make His followers into fishers of men who would sense the needs of those around them and lead them to Jesus who would faithfully meet their every need. He would use ordinary men to bring people to Himself.

The wonderful truth is that God still uses ordinary people like you and me to bring others to the Savior. Will *you* commit to follow Him and allow Him to make you a fisher of men that leads others to Him?

Monday, March 2, 2020

Read Luke 5:1-11.

Reluctant Obedience

Luke 5:5 — "Simon answered, 'Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.'"

One day, Jesus was standing by the Lake of Gennesaret. The crowds were thronging around Him and were listening intently as He shared with them the word of God. Along the water's edge were two boats left there by some fishermen who were washing their nets. Jesus got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon (Peter), and had him put out a little from shore allowing his voice to be magnified so all could hear him. Jesus sat down in the boat and began to teach the people from the boat.

Isn't it interesting that Jesus chose to involve Peter — and use his boat — as He taught the crowd? Peter had no choice but to listen to Jesus. He had a front row seat.

When Jesus had finished speaking to the crowds, He turned to Peter and urged him to put out into deep water and let down the nets for a catch. Simon's response is filled with frustration — and reluctance. “Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.” You see, those fishermen had fished all night and caught nothing. They had tried all of the best fishing spots and come up empty-handed. They were tired, and they were frustrated. BUT! Did you see that little word there? “*But* because you say so, I will let down the nets.” Peter heard the voice of the master, and he responded by obeying Jesus' command even if it was with reluctance — and even if it didn't make sense.

What happened next absolutely astounded Peter! When Peter had done as Jesus commanded, he and his companions caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. Their nets were so full that they had to signal their partners in the other boat to come and help them. They then filled both boats so full that they began to sink.

In his amazement, Peter fell at Jesus' knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man.” (Luke 5:8) In that moment, Peter got a glimpse of Jesus in all of His power and glory. . . . But He also got a glimpse of himself in light of who Jesus was. That's what happens when Jesus reveals Himself in new and greater way, isn't it? We marvel at who He is, but we are also struck by our own sin, inadequacies, and failures.

What is Jesus asking you to do today? Will you obey even if it doesn't make sense to you? Will you allow Him to show Himself to you in even greater ways? Don't let your limited understanding, or even your reluctance, keep you from obeying by faith and thus prevent you from experiencing what He wants to do in you and through you!

Tuesday, March 3, 2020

Read Luke 6:12-16.

A Lesson in Prayer

Luke 6:12-13 — “One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles.”

A number of years ago, I cared for an elderly lady named Mattie Newberry. We

affectionately called her “Granny.” One of the most powerful lessons Granny taught me was in regard to the matter of prayer. Now Mattie was originally from the little town of Hammond, NY up in St. Lawrence County. On a number of occasions, she shared with me that she had a special chair in her living room that she would seek out when she was facing difficult decisions or needed the Lord’s help or guidance. She would tell of staying in that chair and praying until the answer came. She admitted that sometimes she would only be there for a short time before the Lord provided the answer she needed. However, there were other times when she would be there for an extended period of time. She made one thing very clear to me, though. She never left that chair until the Lord gave her a clear sense of what she needed to do, whether it took a matter of minutes or a matter of hours. She knew that some things could not be rushed, and prayer was one of those things that ought not to be rushed.

As we come to this Scripture in Luke 6, Jesus was facing such a momentous decision in choosing the twelve disciples that He spent a whole night in prayer seeking the Father’s heart and seeking the Father’s will. He did not want to rush on ahead or move forward until He had a clear sense of the Father’s will.

It would be interesting to know how Jesus prayed that night out there on the mountainside. Do you suppose that He just relaxed and enjoyed His Father’s presence before He entered into an intense time of teaching and training the disciples for ministry? Do you suppose He sat on that mountainside gazing up in awe at the stars and constellations He had created? Or do you suppose He spent some uninterrupted time praying for each one of the men He would choose as His disciples? Did He know that Judas Iscariot would betray Him for 30 pieces of silver, that Peter would deny three times ever knowing Him, and that Thomas would struggle immensely with doubt? Do you suppose that He would have prayed that they would have the courage and resolve to hold steady in their faith as He was put to death on the cross?

We honestly don’t know how Jesus prayed that night, but we can rest assured that the magnitude of the decision He was facing, and the intensity of the ministry that lay ahead, warranted His spending intimate time in the Father’s presence being renewed and strengthened and prepared for that time. The truth of the matter, though, is that if Jesus needed to spend such time in His father’s presence, how much more do we? May we learn from His example and become people who make prayer a priority in our lives.

Wednesday, March 4, 2020

Read Mark 1:29-34.

A Special Act of Healing

Mark 1:29-31 — “As soon as they left the synagogue, they went with James and John to the home of Simon [Peter] and Andrew. Simon’s mother-in-law was in bed with a fever, and they told Jesus about her. So he went to her, took her hand and helped her up. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.”

I don't know about you, but I hate being sick. I do not like dealing with physical issues or pain. I think even worse than being sick is watching helplessly as a loved one struggles with sickness or pain or injuries — especially a child.

Throughout the Gospel accounts, we see Jesus tenderly and lovingly caring for the sick and helpless and needy. He did not shy away from those who struggled with physical needs, but on many occasions, we see Him graciously bringing healing and restoration to those who were brought to Him. In this particular passage from Mark, we find Jesus and His disciples going with James and John to the home of Simon and Andrew. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever. When they told Jesus about her, what did He do? Did He walk away repulsed by her illness? Did He decide to leave and come back when this dear lady was feeling better? Did He ignore her? Not at all!

The picture that is painted for us is one of genuine concern and compassion. Jesus went to Simon's mother-in-law, took her hand, and helped her up. His heart ached for Simon's mother-in-law when He saw her incapacitated and in bed with this sickness. Now isn't this a tender and compassionate picture? Jesus was never afraid to touch the sick or the untouchables. His heart ached for their pain and brokenness and struggles.

Did you notice what happened after Jesus helped her up? A wonderful and amazing miracle took place in that moment. The fever left her, and she began to wait on them. Now isn't that amazing? She didn't need a week to recover. In that very moment, not only did the fever leave her, but she was *completely* healed. Following this miracle of healing, many others brought their sick to Jesus that He might heal them as well. They also brought their demon-possessed to Him that He might drive out their demons. Those who came to Him in simple faith found healing and wholeness.

Later on, Jesus would send out His disciples with the challenge to heal those who were sick and set free those who were possessed by demons. Before He did that, though, He set a powerful example for them of healing with compassion and love.

Let me ask you, what is your need today? Do you know Jesus as the loving, concerned, and compassionate One who longs to meet your every need? Will you come to Him today in simple trust?

Thursday, March 5, 2020

Read Mark 1:35-39.

The Value of Solitary Prayer

Mark 1:35-37 — “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed, ‘Everyone is looking for you!’”

Have you ever gone looking for somebody and not been able to find them? Their car was in the driveway or in the garage. The door was unlocked. Laundry was hanging on the clothesline. Yet it appeared that nobody was home. The person you were looking for could not be found. That happened to me on a number of occasions when I would bring something over to my dad's — or go to pick up something from him. I would look and look and look. I would call out to him, yet get no answer in return. He would usually appear from around the corner of the house having been out working in his garden or from across the road where he had been working in the barn.

Our Scripture reading tells of Peter and his companions frantically looking for Jesus one morning and expressing frustration when they couldn't find him. The disciples were looking for Jesus. People were looking for Jesus. Yet He seemingly was nowhere to be found.

How quickly the disciples had forgotten that Jesus made it a habit to rise early and go off to a quiet and solitary place to pray. There would be crowds seeking Him soon enough. Those crowds would come demanding His time and attention as they sought healing from their sicknesses or deliverance from demons. Those crowds would come longing to hear His teachings, hanging on His every word, and hoping for some fresh revelation that would meet their needs. There was also the on-going task of teaching and training the disciples. To be properly prepared for those busy days, Jesus made it a habit to withdraw to a quiet place where He could spend time alone with His Heavenly Father and thus prepare His spirit for the busyness that each day held.

Over in Mark 6:31, we see Jesus seeking to instill this same valuable lesson into His disciples. We read: "Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to eat, he said to them, 'Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest.'" Jesus not only set an example for Peter and the other disciples; He also taught them the value of some down time — some quiet time — when they could relax and find renewal and rest. He encouraged them to come apart and spend time with Him.

There's a powerful lesson here for us as well. We live in a high-stress, high-energy world. The stresses of family and work and church can stretch us to the limit. What would Jesus say to us today? Honestly, I think He would say to us what He said to the disciples. I think He would urge us to come apart and spend time with Him on a regular basis and find rest, renewal, and refreshing in His presence. Just as the disciples needed to learn the value of solitary prayer, so do we. Just as they needed to learn the value of renewal through prayer, so do we. Will you endeavor to make this a priority in your life?

Friday, March 6, 2020

Read Matthew 14:13-21. (John 6:1-15)

A Lesson in Multiplication

Matthew 14:16-17 — "Jesus replied, 'They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat.' 'We have only five loaves of bread and two fish,' they answered."

My major in high school was math. I have always enjoyed working with numbers, and I excelled in math — algebra, geometry, trigonometry, and even calculus. Nothing fazed me. My ultimate goal was to combine my affinity for math with a passion for science and one day become an astronomer. As you can tell, God had other plans.

As we read this passage in Matthew 14 and see what Jesus was asking of His disciples, it was definitely going to take more than an affinity for numbers to achieve what Jesus wanted accomplished. John the Baptist had been violently put to death at the hand of King Herod. When Jesus heard what had happened, He had withdrawn by boat privately to a solitary place. Remember that John the Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus, but He was also Jesus' cousin. Jesus was looking for some alone time so He could come to grips with this painful loss that had just taken place. However, that alone time would be short-lived as the crowds followed on foot from the various towns.

When Jesus landed, He saw the crowds and put His own grief aside to compassionately heal the sick. As day turned into evening, the disciples expressed concern that it was getting late, the crowds must surely be getting hungry, and they had no way of meeting this need. They urged Jesus to send the crowds away so that they could go to the nearby villages to buy food for themselves. Jesus' response shocked them. "They do not need to go away. You give them something to eat."

Now those disciples knew they didn't have enough money to buy food for all those people. The account from John's Gospel informs us that the only food they had available was the small lunch of a young lad — five loaves (each about the size of one of our dinner rolls) and two small fish. Now it wouldn't take a mathematician to know that from a human standpoint there was absolutely no way that that small lunch could feed over five thousand people (the size of that crowd). What could they do?

Jesus had the food brought to Him, then He directed the people to sit on the grass. He then took the five loaves and two fish and looking up to heaven gave thanks to God and broke them and gave them to the disciples to distribute to the people. Can you imagine what happened next? As those disciples started handing out the food, it kept multiplying. The more food they distributed, the more there was until everybody had been given enough food to satisfy their hungry stomachs. The amazing thing is that there was not just enough to feed the crowd, there were even leftovers. That day, Jesus did what the disciples could not do and gave them a lesson in multiplication. Wow!

Here is Jesus' lesson regarding multiplication. Put the little you have into God's hands, and He will multiply it to accomplish mighty miracles and meet many needs. You need to let go of what you have and let Him do the rest.

Saturday, March 7, 2020

Read Matthew 14:22-36.

Lessons in Water Walking

Matthew 14:29-30 — “. . . Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and beginning to sink, cried

out, ‘Lord, save me!’”

After an intense time of ministry, Jesus made the disciples get into a boat and go on ahead of him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee while He went up on a mountainside to spend some quiet, uninterrupted time in prayer. When evening came, He was there alone; the boat was a considerable distance from land; and a storm had arisen on the water buffeting the boat with the wind.

Jesus was not with the disciples, but He knew exactly where they were, and He knew their predicament. He knew the intensity of the storm. He knew their struggle. He knew the fear that was clutching at their hearts. And He knew exactly what He had to do. And guess what? He knows exactly where you are and what you are facing and struggling with right now. Take heart.

During the fourth watch of the night, Jesus went out to them, walking on the water. He did not grab another boat and row out to where they were. Not at all! No, as the Creator of the heavens, the earth, the mountains, the seas, and everything in them He had no qualms about taking a stroll across that wind-tossed sea to help His disciples in their distress.

When the disciples saw him walking on the water, their response was very much like ours would have been. They were terrified. In fact, they cried out in their fear, “It’s a ghost!” After all, they — even the fishermen among them — had never ever seen anybody walk on water.

Jesus’ response to His disciples is so touching: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.” Allow me to paraphrase. “Hey guys! It’s only Me! Don’t be afraid! I’m coming!” He challenged them in their fear to trust Him!

As we have seen before, while the others sat by not knowing what to think or say or do, Peter called out to Him: “Lord, if it’s [really] you, tell me to come to you on the water.” Jesus didn’t even hesitate or try to convince Peter why he couldn’t or shouldn’t try to walk on the water. He just called back, “Come!” Without wasting any time, Peter got down out of the boat, and started walking toward Jesus on the water. He was doing great, too, until — Now, that word “until” is a small word, but it speaks volumes. Peter was doing great *until* he saw the wind, felt the spray of the waves, took His eyes off Jesus and started to sink. Fear had replaced faith, and in his fear, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” Immediately, Jesus reached out His hand and caught Peter and then gently admonished him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” When they climbed into the boat, the wind miraculously died down and all was calm. Then those who were in the boat worshiped Him saying, “Truly you are the Son of God!”

As there was for Peter, there are also many lessons here for us. Jesus knows where we are. He knows our circumstances. He knows the storm. He *will* meet us where we are, but we need to take courage, refuse to give way to fear, refuse to focus on the storm, and simply keep our eyes on Jesus. If you’re going to conquer water-walking, you have to keep your eyes on Him!

Sunday, March 8, 2020

Read Matthew 16:13-20.

An Interesting Question

Matthew 16:13, 15 — “When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’” . . . “‘But what about you?’ he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’”

Teachers often ask questions to determine how much their students know or how much knowledge they have retained. Teachers also ask questions to stimulate conversation or to get their students thinking.

This passage of Scripture in Matthew 16 begins with Jesus asking His disciples an intriguing question: “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” In other words, He was asking what people were saying about Him and who He was. Now that can be a risky question, can’t it? The response the disciples gave reveals that there was a variety of opinions floating around about who Jesus was. “They replied, ‘Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’” (Matthew 16:14) Many saw Jesus as John the Baptist or one of the prophets come back to life. Their response reflected the common view that Jesus was the prophet that had been foretold in **Deuteronomy 18:18** “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him.”

Jesus then turned the question around and asked them, “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” In other words, it didn’t really matter what the crowds said; the bottom line was that they needed to decide for themselves who Jesus was. Seeming to be the spokesperson for the group, Simon Peter spoke up declaring, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” What an amazing and powerful confession of faith Peter made on that day!

Jesus went on to proclaim, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.” (Matthew 16:17) Jesus affirmed that this wonderful and glorious truth had not been revealed to Peter by other people. No this truth had been revealed to Him by His Father in heaven. Peter had caught the glorious truth of who Jesus was and joyously proclaimed that to all within earshot.

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus went on to affirm Peter and this truth: “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” What was the “Rock”? Was this a play on the name Jesus had given to Peter (Peter meaning “stone” or “rock”)? Was Peter the “Rock” Jesus was referring to, or was it the glorious truth he had just proclaimed about Jesus? Or was it Jesus Himself who was the “Rock”? To be honest with you, theologians and Bible scholars vary on their interpretation of Jesus’ words to Peter. Following Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on those early believers, Peter did go on to become a great leader in the early church, but he was merely a human instrument used by God to accomplish His purposes. Salvation would come only through faith in Jesus Christ.

Peter had finally come to understand who Jesus was. He knew He was the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Have you? Who do you say Jesus is?

Monday, March 9, 2020

**Read Matthew 16:21-28.
Struggling to Understand**

Matthew 16:24 — “Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.’”

Following Peter’s wonderful and powerful confession of Jesus, we discover Peter’s humanity and limited understanding coming to the forefront once again. Jesus had begun to explain to His disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law, and then be put death. On the third day, He would be raised to life again. Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke Him, “Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!” Jesus turned to Peter and rebuked him, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.” (Matthew 16:22-23)

Yikes! What just happened here? This is quite a turnaround from the previous passage. Hadn’t Peter just given a powerful and moving testimony of who Jesus is? And hadn’t Jesus just affirmed Peter in a positive way? What happened?

Even though Peter had just given a wonderful confession of who Jesus was, his understanding was still limited. He, like many in Israel, was looking for an earthly king, an earthly deliverer, one who would deliver the people of Israel from the hands of Roman domination. When Jesus started describing His impending death and resurrection, Peter was appalled that Jesus was speaking in such terms. After all, wasn’t Jesus going to set up an earthly kingdom — and wasn’t he and the other disciples going to hold key places in that earthly kingdom? Oh my, there was so much that Peter and the other disciples did not understand.

Jesus continued His teaching in the next few verses, but let’s focus on Matthew 16:24. “Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.’” Do you remember the first call that Jesus had given to His disciples? It was simply two words: “Follow me!” Now Jesus is giving them a specific challenge to deny themselves, putting aside their own agenda and their own plans for Him, and taking up their cross to follow Jesus wherever He would lead. No, they did not fully understand Jesus’ purpose in coming to earth. Jesus wasn’t asking them to understand. Not at all! Instead, He was challenging them to continue to follow Him even if they did not understand — even if it didn’t make sense to them.

What is Jesus asking of you? Are you willing to let Him lead you? Are you willing to follow Him in complete trust even though you might not see or understand what He is doing? Are you willing to let go of your own plans and your own agenda to follow Him? May God help you and me to walk in His ways!

Tuesday, March 10, 2020

**Read Matthew 17:1-13.
The Transfiguration**

Matthew 17:1-2 — “After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.”

Peter, James, and John were considered the inner core. Out of the twelve disciples, these three were Jesus’ closest disciples, His most intimate companions or followers. These were the three that He chose to take with Him that day up on the mountain.

While they were on the mountain, something amazing and spectacular happened to Jesus’ appearance. “He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.” (Matthew 17:2) Unbelievable! Beautiful! A wonderful and glorious sight to behold!

As they stood there in awe, taking in the glory and wonder of that moment, there suddenly appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Moses represented the Law. Elijah represented the Prophets. The disciples were speechless — well, James and John were speechless. Peter had to open his mouth. He always did. Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters — one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” When you don’t know what to say, you blurt out the first thing that comes to your mind. That’s what Peter did. And before we condemn Peter, we need to look at ourselves. If we are completely honest, that’s what some of us do, too. We get nervous; we don’t know what to say; so we just blurt out the first thing that comes to our mind.

Why did Peter say what he did? Some have said that perhaps Peter wanted to hold on to that moment and cherish that spectacular, glorious scene as long as he could. Perhaps he preferred to not have to go back down off that mountain to the real world that awaited them below. We don’t really know why Peter reacted the way that he did, but we do know that before Jesus could respond, and before Peter could say anything more, something even more spectacular occurred. A bright cloud — brighter than anything they had ever seen — enveloped them, and a voice came from that cloud: “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” (Matthew 17:5) What a testimony the Heavenly Father spoke in regard to His Son!

Let’s consider the Father’s testimony for a moment. He affirmed that Jesus was indeed His Son. Jesus had been declaring that right along, but many accused Him of blasphemy. The Father’s testimony left no mistake regarding who Jesus was. In a way, it also added weight to Peter’s confession. The Father also proclaimed His love for His Son and affirmed that He was well pleased with Him. In addition, He added an admonition: “Listen to Him!” If they really, truly accepted the Father’s testimony in regard to His Son, they would listen to Him and continue to follow Him in faith and obedience.

The bottom line is, this: if we, too, believe the Father’s words, we will listen to Jesus. We will listen to Him and follow Him in faith and obedience.

A Lesson About Eternal Life — Part 1

Matthew 19:16 — “Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, ‘Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?’”

Now, let’s be honest here. We all know that we will not live forever in these earthly bodies. Even as I write this, our family is mourning the loss of a dearly loved cousin. There comes a time when we all need to look ahead and make preparations for eternity.

The man in this passage of Scripture was young and rich and a ruler. Something had stirred his heart to start thinking about the future and eternity. Coming to Jesus, he asked him a burning question: “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?” Now, it doesn’t take much imagination to recognize what he is asking. “*What good thing must I do?*” He, like many before him and many since him, have tried to attain eternal life by their own efforts — by doing all of the right things — by being good enough.

Jesus responded, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.” (Matthew 19:17) This delighted the young man. He had faithfully kept the commandments which Jesus enumerated for him. That was wonderful. But somehow, this young man sensed that even obedience to the commandments wasn’t enough. He still sensed that something was lacking, that he fell far short, that he needed to do something else.

To his further inquiry, Jesus responded, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” (v. 21) Ouch! That hurt! He was rich, very rich, and he had no desire to sell his possessions. He went away broken-hearted, because he had great wealth. Notice what the focus of his affection was. It wasn’t Jesus. Not at all! No, this man was consumed with his wealth.

Before we consider the rest of this passage, let’s consider for a moment what Jesus was really asking of this man and what the implications were for him and for us. Jesus challenged this man that if he really wanted to be perfect, he was to go, sell his possessions, and give to the poor. The result, according to Jesus, would be that he would have treasure in heaven. Let me ask, “Is there really something spiritual or magical about a person selling their possessions and helping those in need?” Yes, it is a kind thing to do, and many people have done that. Throughout history there have been many philanthropists who have given generously to the poor, the sick, and those in need. Did such generosity gain them a place in heaven? Not really.

Let’s be careful not to miss the real point here. Jesus added these words when He spoke to the young man: “then come follow me.” The real key to gaining eternal life isn’t so much about selling our possessions and giving to the poor, but letting go of whatever it is that holds us in bondage and keeps us from following Jesus. The really important thing is the place we give Jesus in our hearts and lives. Let me ask: Which is more important to you, your wealth or Jesus? What is Jesus asking you to give up so you can follow Him?

Thursday, March 12, 2020

Read Matthew 19:16-30.

A Lesson About Eternal Life — Part 2

Matthew 19:26 — “Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.’”

As we consider this story of the rich young ruler, it’s interesting to consider the human quest to gain or obtain eternal life. How many people throughout history have tried to buy or earn or achieve their way to heaven? According to God’s Word all human efforts are futile.

After the rich young ruler wandered away broken-hearted, Jesus went on to describe how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven — harder even than it was for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. What did Jesus mean by this picture? Now Jesus was not describing a camel going through a typical sewing needle like many of us use. No, He was referring to a gate or entranceway that provided passageway through Jerusalem’s massive walls. It was so narrow and so low that a camel literally had to be unloaded before it could be carefully guided through. The purpose of the gate was to keep the enemy and intruders out while keeping the residents inside safe. As difficult as such a task was, Jesus concluded that it was much easier to unload a camel to get it through that gate than it was for a rich man to enter God’s kingdom.

The disciples were shocked and wondered if there was any hope for anybody to be saved. They reasoned that if it was that difficult for the rich to get into heaven, then surely it must be impossible for ordinary people to get into heaven. Jesus gently reminded them: “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

Peter countered, “We have left everything to follow you.” In other words: “What about us? We have left everything to follow you and be your disciples.” Jesus assured him that they would definitely receive their reward.

Like the disciples, we need to understand that eternal life is not something we buy or gain or achieve. Not at all! It is impossible for us to do anything to gain a place in heaven. Paul clarifies it for us in **Ephesians 2:8-9** — “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast.” Salvation, eternal life, and heaven are God’s good and gracious gifts to us when we accept Jesus as Savior and Lord. What we need to do is let go of anything we are holding on to, and follow Jesus in full commitment and total surrender to Him and His will and His ways. What is impossible for us in our human efforts is made blessedly possible through Christ. What we cannot do, God has graciously provided for us through His Son.

Will you let go of what you are holding on to so that you can follow Jesus with all your heart? Will you receive His wonderful and gracious gifts to you?

Friday, March 13, 1019

Read John 13:1-17.

The Servant Heart of Jesus

John 13:1 — “It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.”

When I attended United Wesleyan College in Allentown, PA, I was so blessed to sit under the teaching and ministry of a wonderful man of God, Dr. Edward Bean. He taught me so much through his teaching and his example. He pastored a little country church at Pt. Phillip, PA called Zion Wesleyan Church. The church sat on a little knoll. Whenever it would rain, snow, or was even a little bit icy, the walk up to the entrance of the church was treacherous. On those days, Dr. Bean, dressed in his long overcoat and equipped with a large umbrella, would wait in the entranceway ready to go out and escort people into the church. I was impressed and challenged by the servant heart he portrayed for us and knew his example in ministry was one I longed to emulate.

What an amazing passage of Scripture we have here in John 13! In this passage, we find many precious nuggets of truth, but we are given a beautiful and humbling picture of the servant heart of Jesus.

Now, in that day, there was normally a servant positioned by the door with a bowl of water and a towel to wash the feet of the guests who had come. Most wore sandals, and the roads were dusty, so even though they had bathed already, their feet would be dusty. On this particular day, there was no servant to do this menial, yet needed task, and none of the disciples had offered to do it.

The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot to betray Jesus. Jesus knew who He was, where He had come from, and what was ahead of Him. He knew that the time had come for Him to leave this world and return to His Father. It was not going to be easy or painless, but He knew that this was the reason and the purpose for which He had come into the world. With that as a backdrop, Jesus “got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. 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.” (John 13:4-5) Jesus was willing to take the place of the lowest servant to meet a need and to serve His disciples.

It’s interesting to note that Jesus went around the room and washed the feet of each one of His disciples. The only one who objected was Peter, but finally even he relented and allowed Jesus to wash his feet. It’s amazing to me that Jesus knew each one of His disciples — the one who loved Him, the one who doubted Him, the one who would betray Him, and the one who would deny Him, yet He did not hesitate to wash their feet. Perhaps He even said a silent prayer for each of them as He knelt before them. When He was finished washing their feet, He put on His clothes and returned to His place. He then used that experience as a teaching opportunity and a challenge to them to go and do likewise — to wash each others feet and to serve one another.

This challenge is for us, too. How is Jesus asking you to serve others today? What

does He want you to do to minister to someone else?

Saturday, March 14, 2020

A Call to Love

John 13:34-35 — “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

As I was doing some research on John 13 for both yesterday’s and today’s devotionals, I came across an interesting insight. The central theme of the first part of John’s Gospel is life. Jesus is life; He is the creator of life; and He is the giver of eternal life to all who believe in Him. As we consider John chapters 13 through 21, the emphasis is on love. Just think, the word life appears 50 times in chapters 1-12 while the word love appears only 6 times. In chapters 13-21, the word life only appears 6 times, and the word love appears 31 times. It seems as Jesus changes the focus of His ministry to prepare His disciples for His death and resurrection, the theme of His ministry and teaching also changes. We especially see that coming to the forefront in John 13.

Yesterday we considered the passage that focused on Jesus washing the feet of His disciples. That passage began with these powerful words: “It was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.” As we move on, we discover Jesus predicting His betrayal by one of His disciples. It’s hard for us to imagine, let alone believe, that one of Jesus’ disciples, one of His closest companions would be the one to betray Jesus and turn Him over to His enemies. But Satan had already entered Judas Iscariot’s heart, and he was waiting for the opportune time to betray his master. As we move on, we also discover Jesus’ prediction that Peter, another of His disciples, one of the inner circle, would deny 3 times that he even knew Jesus.

Jesus would be tested to the utmost, and so would His disciples. In that upper room, He sought to remind them of His love for them, and He sought to show it to them in a tangible way, but He also sought to challenge them to love one another with that same kind of love.

In fact, He told them that He was giving them a new command. That command was summed up in this way: “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” Previously, they had vied for top position in His kingdom. He had just reminded them by serving them, that true greatness and true love is demonstrated by caring for and meeting one another’s needs — no matter how demeaning that service might be. He would soon demonstrate that real love is being willing to lay down one’s life for others.

Jesus went on to remind His disciples that others would know — truly know — that they were His disciples if they truly loved one another.

Let me ask you today, does love mark your life? Will those around you know that you are a Christian — a Christ-follower — by your love for other believers? What a

powerful witness it is to a world that is watching the church when they see genuine, heartfelt, compassionate love from His people!

Sunday, March 15, 2020

Read Luke 22:7-22.

The Last Supper

Luke 22:7-8 — “Then came the day of Unleavened Bread on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, ‘Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover.’”

Passover was an important celebration in the life of the nation of Israel. Its origins are found in the book of Exodus when God brought the people of Israel out of Egypt under Moses’ leadership. God was getting ready to strike the Egyptians with one final plague — the deadliest of them all — the death of the firstborn of all Egyptians both men and animals. But God told Moses to warn the Israelites so that they could be prepared, and so they could protect themselves. The people of Israel were instructed to prepare a special meal of unleavened bread and a roasted lamb. The Israelites were to take some of the blood of the lamb and sprinkle it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of their houses. When the death angel went through to kill the firstborn of every Egyptian, it would see the blood and pass over the houses of the Israelites. The firstborn of the obedient Israelites would be spared while each Egyptian household would suffer horrific loss. Every year thereafter, the Israelites were to joyously celebrate a Passover meal remembering the time when their lives were spared and when they were miraculously freed from Egyptian bondage.

As we come to this passage of Scripture in Luke, Jesus and His disciples were preparing to celebrate the Passover meal together. Jesus gave instructions to Peter and John to go and make the necessary preparations. They followed Jesus instructions and found everything as Jesus had commanded them.

When they were gathered around the table to share the meal together, Jesus expressed delight in being able to share that last Passover meal together with them before His suffering. He acknowledged that He would not eat it again until it found fulfillment in the kingdom of God. As they were gathered around the table, Jesus took the bread, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” He then took the cup, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.” Just as the Israelites had broken bread the night of the first Passover, Jesus broke bread with His disciples. And just as blood had been spilt on the night of that first Passover and sprinkled on the doorposts of their homes to keep the death angel away, so Jesus assured His disciples that His blood was about to be spilt in the establishing of a new covenant — one that would provide forgiveness of sin once and for all.

Do you see what Jesus was doing? He was taking from the old and familiar and establishing something new — a new covenant, a new celebration, a new meal that would remind those first disciples of the wonderful price that would be paid for their salvation and the forgiveness of their sins. Likewise, when we take of that bread which represents

His body broken for us, and when we drink of that juice which represents His blood shed for our sins, we also remember that great sacrifice which He made for us. Lord, help us to never forget!

Monday, March 16, 2020

Read Luke 22:24-38.

Jesus Predicts Peter's Denial

Luke 22:33-34 — “But he [Peter] replied, ‘Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.’ Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.’”

What is the hardest thing you've ever faced in life? Losing a loved one? A horrendous accident? A devastating fire? A rebellious child? A difficult test you had to take or a trial you had to endure? Caring for loved ones and watching them slowly slip away? Life has its ups and downs, its peaks and valleys, its exhilarating successes and devastating losses, and its tragedies and triumphs. Sometimes life seems like a roller coaster ride, doesn't it?

Jesus had just spent some intense moments with His disciples. He had shown a servant spirit as He stooped to wash their dirty feet. He had joined them in celebrating the Passover meal. He broke bread with them and passed the cup to them as a means of remembering Him and His death in what has become known as the Last or Lord's Supper. He had spent a considerable amount of time teaching them and reminding them of some important truths in preparation of His death and resurrection. He assured them that He was not going to leave them as orphans, but He would send the Holy Spirit to them. The Holy Spirit would be with them forever to teach them, guide them, and help them. Jesus even prayed for them asking God to protect them from the evil one and to unite them together as one in Him.

As Jesus spent those last hours with His disciples, His heart was both filled with joy and heavy with grief and pain. As He shared those final moments with them, His heart was filled with love and compassion toward those who had shared in His ministry. Yet His heart was heavy, knowing that His arrest, trial, and death were imminent. His heart was also heavy for another reason. He knew the hearts of His disciples. He knew them. He knew that when the hour of testing came, what was in their hearts would be revealed for the world to see. He knew they would all forsake Him and scatter. He also knew that one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, had already plotted in his heart to betray Him to death for a measly 30 pieces of silver. Oh, how that knowledge brought pain and grief to His heart and cast a dark pall over those hours. He also knew that another of His disciples, Peter, would in the hour of testing deny knowing Jesus — not just once, or twice, but three times.

So it was with a heavy heart, that Jesus shared that truth with His disciples. Peter had declared that regardless that one of them would betray Jesus, he wouldn't. He assured Jesus that He was ready to go with Him to prison and to death. But Jesus knew. He knew Peter's heart, and He answered Peter, “I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.” What a prediction!

Before you condemn Judas or Peter, let me remind you that Jesus knows your heart, too. What does He see? Will you allow Him to strengthen your heart so that you can stand firm and steadfast in the hour of testing?

Tuesday, March 17, 2020 Read Luke 22:31-34.

Jesus Prays for Peter

Luke 22:31-32 — “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.”

How many times has somebody shared with you a particular problem they are facing or struggling with, and you have responded, “I’ll pray for you?” It’s so easy to say those words, isn’t it, but do we really remember to pray for those needs? I will be candid with you here. I have been extremely blessed to have a couple of very dear friends who respond to me in my struggles, “Let me pray for you right now.” What a blessing it is to have somebody put their arms around me and lift my name and my needs to our Heavenly Father in prayer!

That is what we see in this passage with Jesus and Peter. Jesus had just celebrated with His disciples what would become known as the Last Supper. At that time, Jesus predicted that one of His disciples would betray Him to death. He knew that there was a traitor in their midst. He knew that Judas’ heart was not fully committed to Him. He knew that Judas had already made plans to betray Him to death. He knew, but He continued to pour out His love into Judas’ life.

Jesus also predicted that Peter would deny three times that he even knew Jesus. Peter vehemently declared that he would never do such a thing, and that he would gladly go to prison and death for Him. But again, Jesus knew Peter’s heart. He knew how Peter vacillated between complete devotion and loyalty to defiance when He would speak of His impending death. Jesus knew Peter’s heart, and He knew that Peter was not yet rock-solid.

So what did Jesus do? Read again the words from Luke 22:31-32: “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” Jesus knew that the enemy was going to test Peter to the utmost. He knew that Peter would be sifted like wheat. But He offered Peter this assurance, “But I have prayed for you, Simon!” He did not say, “I will pray for you!” Nope! He declared, “*I have [already] prayed for you!*” Peter would need His Master’s prayers now more than ever, and Jesus assured Peter that He had his back, and He had already prayed for him. Wow!

What did Jesus pray for in regard to the test Peter was about to face? He prayed for Peter [Simon] that his faith would not fail — that he would not lose his faith in his Savior. He also gave Peter a challenge: “And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” Peter would be tested to the core of his being, but he would make it through that test. His failure to be true to Jesus would not be the final word. When he came out

on the other side, which Jesus assured him he would, he was to strengthen and help his brothers in Christ.

Here's a reminder for you today. Whatever trial you are facing right now, *Jesus is praying for you*. He will see you through — and He will continue to use you for His kingdom and for His glory. Keep your faith in Him!

Wednesday, March 18, 2020

Read Mark 14:32-41.

Praying or Sleeping?

Mark 14:37-38 — “Then he [Jesus] returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. ‘Simon,’ he said to Peter, ‘are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.’”

Have you ever fallen asleep praying? We could probably all respond in the affirmative to that. I recently read of a pastor who was working on a sermon during the wee hours of the morning. Exhausted from a long day, he dozed off. When he woke up, he discovered he had dozed off with his finger on the letter j key and had typed 5 pages of the letter j.

Following the Passover meal and the institution of the Last Supper, Jesus and His disciples withdrew to a place called Gethsemane. He encouraged His disciples to sit and wait for Him while He took Peter, James, and John (the inner core) along with Him. He began to be deeply distressed and troubled, and His soul was overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. He told those three disciples to stay where they were while He went on a bit farther to pray. He prayed as earnestly as He could that if possible that awful hour might pass from him. He cried out, “Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” (Mark 14:36) Jesus knew why He had come. He knew that He had come to die on the cross for the sins of all mankind. But as the time drew near, the agony of what lay ahead overwhelmed Him.

When Jesus returned to His disciples, He found them sleeping. “Simon,” he said to Peter, “are you asleep? Could you not keep watch with me for one hour? Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.” (Mark 14:37-38) It was quite obvious when Jesus returned to His disciples that they had nodded off. In fact, this scenario played out 3 times. Jesus was overwhelmed with anguish at His impending death and desired the prayer support of His closest companions, and yet they couldn't stay awake and watch with Him for even a brief time.

If you remember, just prior to this, Peter had declared that he would be willing to die with Jesus if it came to that, and certainly he would never disown Jesus, but when the hour of testing came, when Jesus needed his support and strength the most, Peter and the other two disciples with him gave in to the fleshly needs and slept when Jesus had asked them to pray.

What about you? What has Jesus asked of you? Are you praying — or are you

sleeping? Are you waiting patiently in His presence — or have you grown tired of waiting and given in to the temptations and pressures and stresses of life? Jesus had reminded Peter, and He would remind us, “The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.” Hold steady and don’t give up!

Thursday, March 19, 2020

Read Luke 22:47-53.

A Sword

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

As we consider the arrest and death of Jesus, we most often focus our attention on Jesus, and rightly so. After all, Jesus allowed Himself to be arrested, unjustly tried, and crucified for us. However, since the theme of our Lenten Devotions focuses on the Apostle Peter, we want to take a few moments today to consider what Peter was up to during this important period of Jesus’ life.

According to Luke 22:38, the disciples had two swords with them. Jesus had assured them that that was enough. As Judas and the entourage of soldiers approached to arrest Jesus, Peter, one of Jesus’ closest followers, went on the defensive, and took advantage of one of the swords to cut off the right ear of the servant of the high priest. Yikes! Appalled at this attack, Jesus answered, “No more of this!” He knew that it was not time to strike with a sword. So, in the midst of the darkness of that hour, we are given a beautiful and compassionate picture of Jesus who, while facing His own crisis, reached over and re-attached the man’s ear. Wow! Think about it! Jesus was in the process of being arrested; He was facing imminent death; yet He didn’t hesitate to perform a miracle for the man whose ear had just been severed. Tenderly, compassionately, He touched the ear and healed him. It would be interesting to learn how that miracle impacted the life of that man. We will never know on this side of eternity. But I can’t help but wonder how that man’s life was touched or even turned around by the kindness of Jesus.

We see 2 totally opposite responses in that garden. Peter picked up a sword and took a swing at a supposed enemy — the high priest’s servant. Jesus, on the other hand, reacted with kindness, compassion, and grace to the recipient of that attack from the sword. Two men. Two reactions.

Think with me for a moment. How would you react? *How do you react?* When you are attacked, how do you respond? Do you retaliate with a sword — or with words — or with revenge? Do you lash out in anger when another spreads unwarranted, vicious lies about you? It’s hard not to, isn’t it? People can be so cruel, can’t they? And life can seem so unfair when the attacks against us are based on lies or another’s hidden agenda.

Or do you, like Jesus, show kindness, compassion, and grace? It’s easy to show kindness and grace when we are treated with kindness and grace, but life isn’t always like that. Jesus set a supreme example for us of how to react to others — even our enemies —

when under pressure. Peter had a lot to learn, but Jesus set a powerful example for him. He's done the same for us. May God help us to react in a way that would honor our Lord!

Friday, March 20, 2020

Read John 18:15-27.

Peter Disowns Jesus

John 18:15-18 — “Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. Because this disciple was known to the high priest, he went with Jesus into the high priest’s courtyard, but Peter had to wait outside at the door. The other disciple, who was known to the high priest, came back, spoke to the girl on duty there and brought Peter in. ‘You are not one of the disciples, are you?’ the girl at the door asked Peter. He replied, ‘I am not.’ It was cold, and the servants and officials stood around a fire they had made to keep warm. Peter also was standing with them, warming himself.”

Sometimes, we can get ourselves into trouble just by the company we keep. Sometimes we set ourselves up for temptation by the situations we get ourselves into. Sometimes, pride sets up for a fall.

Jesus had warned Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.” (Matthew 26:41) Jesus had also warned Peter that Satan was going to sift him as wheat.

After Jesus’ arrest, He was bound and brought first to Annas, who was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year. Simon Peter and another disciple were following Jesus. The other disciple was known to the high priest, and he went with Jesus into the high priest’s courtyard, but Peter had to wait outside. The other disciple came back, spoke to the girl at the door who brought Peter in. She asked Peter, “You are not one of the disciples, are you?” Peter replied, “I am not.” This is the first denial.

As we move on, we discover that Peter had moved from the gate over to the fire where some servants and officials were warming themselves. Peter stood there among them, warming himself by the fire. As he stood there warming himself, he was asked, “You are not one of his disciples, are you?” Peter denied it, declaring, “I am not!” This is the second denial.

Then one of the high priest’s servants, a relative of the man whose ear Peter had cut off, challenged him, “Didn’t I see you with him in the olive garden?” Perhaps he’d even seen Peter take the sword and cut off Malchus’ ear. Again, Peter vehemently declared any connection with Jesus. Following this third denial, the rooster crowed, and Peter knew he had just done what he had so adamantly declared he would never do.

Jesus had warned Peter. He knew Peter was proud, head-strong, and impetuous. He knew that temptation was strong — and that Peter was weak. He warned him to watch and pray so that he would not give in to temptation. When the hour of temptation and decision came, Peter was found hanging around with those who were not followers of Christ instead of with those who would help him to stay strong and faithful.

Is there a warning here for us? 1 Corinthians 10:13 — “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”

Saturday, March 21, 2020

Read Luke 22:54-62.

The Moment of Truth

Luke 22:60-62 — “Peter replied, ‘Man, I don’t know what you’re talking about!’ Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. 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.’ *And he went outside and wept bitterly.*”

Have you ever done or said something of which you were horribly ashamed after you did or said it? Do you know the intense feeling of guilt and remorse from having done wrong or sinned?

Peter did! Peter could tell you some stories about shame and guilt and remorse. Actually, Peter could tell you HIS story of his own heart-ache and pain from the time he denied three times that he knew Jesus. Maybe his words and his actions did not hit him while he was making those horrible claims that he did not know Jesus, but as soon as that rooster started crowing, his heart broke with intense grief, and he went outside and wept bitterly. I’m not sure which hurt worse — the pain of knowing what he had just done, or the pain of Jesus’ aggrieved gaze directed at him knowing that His prediction of Peter’s denials had just been fulfilled. It’s one thing to know you have done wrong, but to be caught in the act, now that’s another thing entirely. Peter knew what he had done, but Jesus also knew — and that stung. He had failed his Lord! He had done what he said he would never do! In that moment, his heart broke — and he wept bitterly.

As you read this, you may be struggling with that same pain — the pain of failure, the pain of guilt, the pain of shame. Please let me assure you today that failure does not have to be final. Guilt and shame do not have to mark your life. With that in mind, please allow me to share with you the words of Adam Hamilton from his book *Simon Peter: Flawed but Faithful Disciple*. “But Peter’s story also shows us that we need not be defined by our failures. God does not define us by the worst things we ever did. Jesus makes amazing use of flawed disciples. He continually invites us back, forgives us, and restores us. Sometimes he uses us even more profoundly, not merely in spite of our flaws and failures but because of them. Jesus is the Lord of the second chance.”

So if you find yourself in a place similar to Peter’s, let me assure you that you have a Savior who loves you and longs for you to know His forgiveness and grace and restoration. Your heart may be broken, and you may be weeping bitterly, but He invites you to come to Him — in fact, He’s waiting for you to come to Him. Will you humble yourself, admit what you have done, and allow Him to forgive and restore you? Receive what He is offering you today! And, remember — yes, remember that He still works in

and through flawed but forgiven individuals.

Sunday, March 22, 2020

Read John 19:25-27.

Where's Peter?

John 19:25-26 — “Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, ‘Dear woman, here is your son.’”

Have you ever had a friend or relative who declared that they would stand by you through thick or thin; who adamantly declared that no matter what happened to you, they would be right there for you; or who vowed they would not leave you in a lurch but would support you no matter the personal cost to them? What happened when the moment of crisis came? Were they there for you? Did they stand up to their end of the bargain? Believe me, it’s a rare and true friend who stays absolutely true and faithful regardless of the circumstances of life.

As we consider this passage of Scripture that focuses on the cross, notice who is gathered there — Jesus’ mother, his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene, and the beloved disciple, John. We discover in some of the other Gospel accounts that there were women who had faithfully supported Jesus throughout His earthly ministry who now watched the crucifixion scene from the distance. But notice with me who wasn’t there — who was absent from this significant event. Where were the rest of the disciples? We know Judas Iscariot had already gone out and hung himself, but what about the other 9? And where was Peter? After all, Peter had declared that he would go with Jesus to the death. He had vehemently declared his allegiance to Jesus no matter what fate befell Him. Yet in that hour of deepest need, Peter and the other disciples were nowhere to be seen. In their fear of the Jews, and in the anguish of watching their Master arrested, they had fled and had resorted to hiding away from human eyes.

As we consider this thought of who was at the cross and who had fled out of fear, I cannot help but think about our own lives. Do we follow Jesus only when it is convenient or when everything is going well? Do we trust Him and obey Him only when what He asks of us is easy or comes with pleasurable rewards? Or are we committed to following Him to the very end regardless of the cost to us?

I would encourage you to take a few moments today and examine your own

heart and your own commitment to the Lord. First of all, is your heart right with God? Second of all, are you fully committed to doing God's will? Finally, are you willing to let your faith in the Lord be bigger than your fear of the enemy or of the unknown?

Monday, March 23, 2020

Read John 20:1-18.

The Empty Tomb

John 20:1 — “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.”

Have you ever put something in a safe place, then when you went back to retrieve it, it wasn't there? It seems to be happening to me more and more as I grow older. Some of you can relate. Some of you have shared similar stories. It's frustrating when you cannot find what you are looking for when you're sure you know where you left it.

Can you imagine Mary Magdalene's shock and dismay when she reached the tomb on that first day of the week and found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance to the tomb? She knew where Jesus had been buried. She had watched from a distance as His lifeless body had been laid in that borrowed tomb. When she discovered that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance to the tomb, she didn't enter the tomb to see what was going on but instead immediately hurried off to find Peter and John and report to them what she had seen. They in turn ran back to the tomb. John outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He found that indeed the stone had been rolled away, and he bent over and looked at the strips of linen lying there, but he did not go in. On the other hand, Peter, as impetuous as he was, arrived at the tomb and rushed right inside. He saw the strips of linen lying there as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen, but there was no sign of His body. Finally John went inside as well. Seeing no need to wait around outside an empty tomb, they went back to their homes believing but still not understanding that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

Meanwhile, Mary stood outside of the tomb weeping. She bent over to look inside the tomb and saw two angels in white seated where Jesus' body had been. “Why are you crying?” they asked. Mary's response echoed the grief in her heart, “They have taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they have put Him? Even after seeing the empty tomb and the angels, she still did not understand. All she knew was that *Jesus' body was not where it was supposed to be!* Suddenly, she turned and saw Jesus, but she did not recognize Him. He spoke to her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” Thinking he was the gardener, she begged Him, “Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have put Him, and I will get Him.”

He spoke again. It was just one word — her name: “Mary.” And in that moment, at the sound of His voice speaking her name, she recognized Him. She knew who He

was. She knew it was Jesus, and she knew that He was alive. She turned to Him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” which means teacher. He then gave her a message to bring to His disciples.

Just think, neither Mary nor the disciples experienced the joy of Jesus’ resurrection until they had first mourned His death and then found the empty tomb. Oh the joy Mary experienced that first day of the week. Jesus was alive, and she had seen Him! And soon the disciples would likewise share that joy!

Tuesday, March 24, 2020

Read Mark 16:1-8.

A Message for Peter

Mark 16:6-7 — “‘Don’t be alarmed,’ he said. ‘You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell the disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’”

Consider with me for a moment, what is the most unusual message you have ever received? What made that message unusual or unique? Was it unusual because of the content of the message, the delivery of the message, or the one who relayed that message to you?

As we consider these verses from the Gospel of Mark, we discover a strange message given by a unique individual to some unlikely recipients. Some women had gone to the tomb early in the morning on that first day of the week. They had bought spices which they had prepared to anoint His body to complete the burial process. They hadn’t reckoned on how to move the stone away from the entrance to the tomb in order to get inside, however, when they reached the tomb, the stone had already been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side of the tomb. They were alarmed and shocked. Even more shocking was the message this young man — an angel of the Lord — relayed to them. “‘Don’t be alarmed,’ he said. ‘You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.’”

Just think, these women had come with spices prepared to complete the burial process, but suddenly an angel interrupted their thoughts and their mission with the news that Jesus was not there. Yes, He had indeed been crucified! Yes, He had indeed died! But “He has risen! He is not here!” Then the angel pointed to the place where Jesus’ body had been laid and showed them the evidence. “That’s where He was, but He’s no longer there! He has risen from the dead!”

But the message did not end with that good news. No, the angel gave the women a new message and a new mission. “But go, tell the disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’” The news the women had received was not to be selfishly kept to themselves. Not at all! No they needed to get that message to the disciples — and especially to Peter. There seemed to be an urgency in the second part of that message. “Make sure that Peter gets this message!” Why Peter?

Why was it so urgent that Peter got that message?

There are a couple of reasons why it was urgent that Peter especially got this message. First, having denied his Lord three times, his heart bore a heavy load of guilt and shame. He needed to know and discover the power of God's grace in dealing with his failure and going forward. Second, Jesus was counting on Peter and the other disciples to go out and continue the work He had trained and equipped them for. Peter would become a powerful leader in the early church, but each of the disciples would have a place in advancing the good news of the resurrection. And believe it or not, so do you and I! He is risen! Let's proclaim it!

Wednesday, March 25, 2020

A Surprise Visitor

John 20:19-20 — “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!’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.”

Over the years, I have had a recurring nightmare that always leaves me unsettled. I dream that I am at my parents' house, and I hear a burglar outside trying to enter the building. I hurry to lock the door — and I lock one lock after another. No matter how many locks I lock, the burglar still gets in. I always wake up with an uneasy, unsettled feeling. It is indeed an unsettling feeling when you think you are in a safe place, and you find out that you are not alone.

Peter and John had themselves seen the empty tomb. Not only that, but Mary Magdalene had already shared with the disciples the wonderful news that she had actually seen Jesus and that He was indeed alive. However, as we move on in the narrative of Jesus' resurrection appearances, we find the disciples huddled together behind locked doors for fear of the Jews. Instead of rejoicing that Jesus was alive, they were cowering in fear, hiding from their own people, and fearing that if they had put Jesus to death on the cross, what would they do to them?

Suddenly, without any warning, Jesus stood in their midst. Wow! They could hardly believe their eyes. Then Jesus spoke to them, “Peace be with you.” How many times in the past had Jesus come to them, seen how frightened they were, and challenged them, “Fear not! It is I!” Now, instead of challenging them, “Fear not,” He extends a blessing of peace. “Peace be with you.” He knew what they needed. He knew they didn't need words of rebuke. He knew they didn't need to be challenged to a deeper faith. Not at all! No, He knew they needed words of peace, of comfort, and of God's blessing.

He showed them His hands and side. He showed them the wounds He had suffered on the cross. The disciples were absolutely overjoyed when they saw Him for themselves and knew without a doubt that He was truly alive.

Again, He spoke to them, “Peace be with you!” This time, He added these wonderful words, “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” (John 20:21) He then breathed on them and instructed them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone

his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” (John 20:22-23)

What a reminder this was that Jesus was giving to His disciples. He still had work for them to do. Just as the Father had sent Jesus into the world, so now Jesus was sending His disciples into the world to continue the work He had begun. He knew they could not do it alone, so He breathed on them and instructed them to receive the Holy Spirit. Just think, the same Holy Spirit who had empowered Jesus would soon come on them and empower them. Soon they would be able to go forth in His name to serve Him! Just think — so can we!

Thursday, March 26, 2020

Jesus Appears to Peter

1 Corinthians 15:3-5 — “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.”

Luke 24:33-34 — “They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, ‘It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.’”

Following Jesus’ death and resurrection, we find a number of accounts of Jesus appearing to various individuals and His disciples. Since the focus of this devotional series is on Peter, we are not going to consider every resurrection appearance, but we have wanted to focus on those that directly relate to Peter.

The two passages above indicate a special appearance that Jesus made specifically to Peter. We are given no details — just the simple fact that Jesus had appeared to Peter. Adam Hamilton, in his book *Simon Peter: Flawed but Faithful Disciple*, acknowledged that we indeed have no other written record of this appearance, but it was significant enough to be mentioned in both the book of 1 Corinthians and the Gospel of Luke. Apparently, Jesus sensed an urgency to intentionally go searching for Peter. More than anything else, He wanted Peter to know that He had been raised from the dead and that He was indeed alive.

As I consider these two verses, one thought comes to my mind and that is just how intensely Jesus wants us to know Him. He doesn’t just want us to know about Him or to know that He is alive, but He wants us to truly, earnestly know Him and His great and wonderful love for us. Because He wants us to know Him, He comes searching for us, seeking us out, seeking to make Himself known to us. He won’t force Himself on us. Never! He won’t coerce us to love Him and follow Him. He won’t manipulate us into a relationship that we have no desire to be a part of. No, He comes to us and assures us of His love for us. He woos us with His tenderness and His mercy and grace. He reveals Himself to us as the One who can and will faithfully meet our every need. Then, as a perfect gentleman, He leaves the choice up to us as to whether

we will accept Him — or whether we will walk away seeing no need for Him.

Wherever you are today, He loves you! Whatever you have done in the past, He desires to forgive you! No matter how desperate your future looks, He longs to give you hope and a future. Will you open your heart to Him today? Will you let Him find you and restore you and meet your every need? More importantly, will you let Him be your Savior and Lord?

Friday, March 27, 2020

Read John 21:1-14.

Breakfast on the Seashore

John 21:1-3 — “Afterward Jesus appeared again to his disciples, by the sea of Tiberias. It happened this way: Simon Peter, Thomas (called Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples were together. ‘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.”

Have you ever blown it? Really blown it? Have you ever messed up so horribly that you were embarrassed to even look in a mirror, look your boss in the eye, or even face your family or friends? It’s awful, isn’t it?

When we think about people who have really messed up, one individual immediately comes to mind — Peter. Peter was impetuous. He had blown it many times. He often spoke before he thought. He blundered ahead making great boasts. This character flaw often got him into trouble — big trouble. His worst blunder, though, came after Jesus had been arrested and was awaiting trial. Peter had denied **THREE** times that he knew Jesus. Once would have been bad enough, but *three times* Peter denied knowing Jesus. What made this blunder so bad was that just a few hours before this, Peter had vehemently declared to Jesus’ face that he would never do such a thing. He would never turn his back on Jesus. He declared that even if all others forsook him, he never would.

As we come to John 20, we need to understand that life was confusing to those disciples at that point. Jesus had been crucified. He had been raised to life. He had already appeared to His disciples a couple of times. But what next? Peter boldly spoke up, “I’m going out to fish.” The others decided to join him. They ultimately went back to the only thing they knew — **FISHING** — but even that became a failure. They caught **NOTHING** — **NOT EVEN ONE FISH!** Their nets were completely empty.

At their point of utmost failure and disappointment, they noticed a man on the shore, but they didn’t recognize Him. He called out to them “Friends haven’t you any fish?” How embarrassing for them to have to admit that they hadn’t caught any fish. Their reply was a dismal, “**NO!**” This man called back, “Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find them.”

Can you imagine what was going through their heads at this point? After all, most

of them were fishermen by trade. After all, they had fished all night. They did as this man commanded them and caught so many fish that their nets could not contain them all. In fact, somebody even counted the fish — 153 in all. In that moment, they finally recognized the man on the shore. They knew it was Jesus! Peter immediately made his way to the shore where the others joined him. When they landed they saw a fire of burning coals there with some fish on it, and some bread. Jesus encouraged them to bring some of the fish they had caught and invited them to “Come and have breakfast.”

A night of failure had ended with a special invitation from Jesus to join Him for breakfast. Jesus had once again met them at their point of need. Likewise, He invites you to come to Him and enjoy sweet fellowship with Him.

Saturday, March 28, 2020

Read John 21:15-23.

A Disciple Reinstated

John 21:15 — “When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?’ ‘Yes, Lord,’ he said, ‘you know that I love you.’ Jesus said, ‘Feed my lambs.’”

What a beautiful time of fellowship Jesus and His disciples must have enjoyed along the shore as they ate breakfast together. Oh, how that time together, especially when Jesus took the bread, broke it, and gave it to them, and then did the same with the fish, must have reminded them of other times — the feeding of the 5000, the previous miraculous catch of fish, and even the last supper together. How wonderful it was to be able to enjoy intimate fellowship together once again!

After sharing breakfast together around the fire on the seashore, we find Jesus taking Peter aside and the two of them going for a walk along the shore. I can’t help but wonder if Peter had been dreading this moment alone with Jesus. Oh, yes, he loved Jesus, but he knew — and Jesus knew — that there was some unfinished business that needed to be faced.

As they walked along, Jesus confronted Peter. Three times Jesus questioned Peter about his love for him. Twice He asked, “Simon, son of John, do you love [agape] me?” Twice, Peter replied, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love [phileo] you.” In other words, Jesus was asking Peter, “Peter, what’s most important to you? Do you love me above all else?” Peter had known that he would eventually have to face what he had done when he had denied three times that he knew Jesus, but to now have Jesus question whether or not he really loved Him — and whether he really, truly loved Him with the greatest love there was, now that was tough, really tough. Peter replied that he loved Jesus, yes, but his response indicated that he struggled to love Him with anything more than a friendship kind of love. He had boasted earlier about his love for Jesus, but now Now he hesitated to make that kind of a commitment.

The third time when Jesus asked Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me,” He stooped to Peter’s level and used the word *phileo*. In other words, “Simon, son of John, do you love me as a friend?” Peter was hurt when Jesus questioned him the third time,

but he replied, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”

Jesus had a plan and a purpose for addressing Peter’s love for Him. You see, Peter’s love and commitment were too important to Jesus to just let him go. He had work for Peter to do. There were lambs to be fed and sheep to be taken care of. There was indeed work for Peter to do, but Peter would never be able to do it until he faced his past and his failure and reaffirmed his love for Jesus and his commitment to Him. Jesus lovingly brought Peter to that point. He could not let Peter flounder aimlessly. He had to help him find restoration.

Just as Peter’s faith, love, and relationship with Jesus were too important for Jesus to let him go, so is yours. If you have failed Jesus or been unfaithful in your commitment to Him, Jesus wants to restore you today! Will you seek His forgiveness and renew your commitment to Him today?

Sunday, March 29, 2020

Read Acts 1:1-11.

Waiting for the Promise

Acts 1:4-5 — “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. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’”

We live in a fast-paced, continually on-the-go society. We hate to wait. We look for the shortest lines in the grocery store. We wait with impatience at the doctor’s office. A lengthy stop at a red light finds us impatiently drumming our fingers on the steering wheel. And when traffic is delayed for any length of time due to weather or an accident or inept drivers, we start muttering and fuming in frustration. Now let’s be honest, we hate to wait.

In Luke 24:49, Jesus gave His disciples the following instructions: “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.” The disciples were very clearly commanded to wait in Jerusalem until they had received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

What was the purpose of that time of waiting? Honestly, I think it was three-fold. First, it was a time for them to search their own hearts, their own motives, and their own agendas. On several occasions while Jesus and the disciples were together, Jesus had to address His disciples in regard to their selfish ambitions as each vied for a place of greater prominence in His kingdom. Each wanted to be number one. Each wanted to be closest to Jesus. Each wanted a place of honor in His kingdom. Now that Jesus had been crucified, risen, and returned to heaven, they had a lot of soul-searching to do to make sure that their hearts and their motives were pure.

That time of waiting had a second purpose. That time of waiting was a time to come together as one. In Acts 1:14, we find the believers uniting together in prayer. They not only had to search their own hearts, but they had to put aside anything that divided them. Prayer is a great unifier. It’s hard to be divided when you’re praying

together. Not only that, but they would have to be united together as one if they were to work together to bring the Gospel message to a world lost in the darkness and depravity of sin.

In Acts 1:12-26, we find yet another purpose of that time of waiting. The group of 12 disciples was now down to 11 following Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus and his subsequent death. It seemed necessary to them to fulfill Scripture and find a replacement for Judas — one who had been with them the whole time Jesus had been with them beginning with John's baptism to the time Jesus had been taken up from them. They proposed two men — Joseph called Barsabbas and also Matthias. They prayed for God's direction then cast lots. Matthias was chosen to fill the position vacated by Judas.

Although we may not like to wait, sometimes it's necessary to spend time in quietness and prayer allowing God to search our hearts, bind us together as one, and equip us for the task at hand. Will you pause and seek Him today?

Monday, March 30, 2020

Read Acts 2:1-13.

The Holy Spirit Comes

Acts 2:1-4 — “When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.”

Fifty days had passed since the Passover meal in which Jesus had instituted what has since become known as the Last Supper. Passover commemorated the night on which God had delivered the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. Fifty days after the Feast of Passover, the Israelites celebrated Shavuot which remembered the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai. The word Shavuot means “weeks” and the celebration of Shavuot occurred seven weeks after Passover. It is also the time when early summer harvest was being celebrated and when the first fruits of the harvest were brought as an offering to God. The term Pentecost is Greek and means fifty days.

As we come to Acts 2, the people of Israel were gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost and the giving of the law and the harvest. The disciples had continued to wait in Jerusalem following the resurrection of Jesus, and they were still gathered there as the day of Pentecost came. As we consider what happened on that special day, it would be wise for us to remember what was taking place in that upper room where the disciples, women, and other believers were gathered. They continued to wait in the Lord's presence, and they continued to be united together in prayer. Acts 2:1 in the King James Version gives us another key piece of information: “And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.” Those disciples weren't just together. *No, they were united together in harmony and unity. They had put aside their own agendas and were in one accord.* That time of waiting had accomplished what 3 years of learning at the feet of Jesus had not.

As they were waiting together in that upper room, the Holy Spirit came upon them in a mighty powerful way. A sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ALL of them were filled with the Holy Spirit, and each began to speak in other tongues or languages as the Spirit enabled them. It wasn't long before everything overflowed out into the streets of Jerusalem. People who had gathered in Jerusalem from all over the world heard the Good News about Jesus in their own languages. Astonishment was followed by confusion. Many could not make sense of what was happening. Soon, Peter — empowered by the Holy Spirit — would explain that these people weren't drunk but had been filled by the Holy Spirit of God.

A new day and a new age had come upon those early believers. God's promise had been fulfilled! The Holy Spirit had come! The disciples now had the power of the Holy Spirit to go out and continue the work Jesus had begun!

Tuesday, March 31, 2020

Read Acts 2:14-41.

The Message of the Resurrection: One Got OUT!

Acts 2:22-24 — “Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. 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.”

Phil Callaway wrote that when his oldest son was only five years old, they were driving past a graveyard one sleepy Sunday afternoon. Noticing a newly excavated tomb with a pile of dirt beside it, his son pointed and said, “Look, Dad! One got out!”

Phil almost drove off the road laughing, much to the surprise of his son. Now, every time he passes a graveyard, and every time he sees a cross at the front of the church, he is reminded that “One got OUT!” Death could not keep our Savior in the ground. (from *What the Cross Means to Me*)

After the Holy Spirit came mightily upon those early believers who were gathered there in Jerusalem waiting for the fulfillment of God's promise, and after the crowd had spilled out into the streets, Peter powerfully proclaimed a message explaining the events that had just taken place. In his message, Peter clearly, powerfully, and unashamedly proclaimed Jesus Christ to those in Jerusalem that day. He acknowledged that God had mightily and powerfully worked through Jesus during His earthly life by performing miracles, wonders, and signs among them. He reminded them that they, with the help of wicked men, had crucified the Son of God. They had been the ones responsible for His death. He also testified that it was God Himself who freed Jesus from the agony of death. Why? Because it was impossible — absolutely impossible — for death to keep its hold or its grip on Him — the pure, sinless Lamb of God. It was impossible for death to forever hold captive the sinless Son of God.

The Holy Spirit did such a convicting work in the hearts of those listening to that message that day that they begged Peter, “Brothers, what shall we do?” He responded, “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. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord your God will call.” (Acts 2:38-39) Those who believed were baptized and over 3000 people were added to their number on that day. Imagine that! When the Holy Spirit came upon Peter, God used that fisherman turned fisher of men to preach a message that would impact thousands for eternity. Peter truly needed God’s Spirit to do God’s work.

I would encourage you to take a few moments today to ask God to reveal this same wonderful truth to you. Jesus died for your sins and mine — but He did not stay dead. God, through His mighty power, raised Him to life again so that we, too, could have new life. What a miracle! What power! What love! Let’s pause today to celebrate this wonderful and amazing miracle.

Wednesday, April, 1, 2020

Read Acts 3:1-10.

A Cup of Grace

Acts 3:6 — “Then Peter said, ‘Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have, I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.’”

Clink. Clink. Clunk. Can you hear the sound of coins tossed carelessly into the cup of a poor beggar looking for — longing for — just enough to cover his next meal? Can you see the look of disgust as passersby step around him in order to avoid having to make contact or provide help?

Imagine the scene with me. Peter and John were going up to the Temple at the time of prayer — 3:00 in the afternoon. As they were arriving at the Temple, a crippled beggar was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful where he was placed day after day in the hopes of receiving money from those going to worship. He couldn’t walk. He couldn’t work. He couldn’t do anything for himself. Nor were there any programs like we have today that provided assistance for the poor and needy. His only option was to beg — and to hope that somebody, anybody, would toss even a few coins his way — just enough to provide his next meal.

As Peter and John approached, he asked them for money. What happened next was far greater than anything the man could have ever dared hope for or even imagine. Peter and John looked straight at the man, and Peter challenged him to look at them. The man was hoping for money, but Peter offered him something greater than a coin or two. Peter spoke: “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have, I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” Peter reached out and took the man by the right hand and helped him up. Instantly — you’ve just got to love that word — “*Instantly* the man’s feet and ankles became strong!” (v. 7) He jumped to his feet. He could walk! He could jump! He could dance! There were no limits to what he could do! He was free! He walked with Peter and John into the temple courts, walking and jumping and praising

God.

As I ponder this incident, one thought amazes me. That poor crippled beggar was looking for a coin or two to be dropped into his cup to provide his next meal. God's plan for that man on that day involved an encounter with two Christ followers who would help him find something even greater and more wonderful. His cup wouldn't be filled with money. No, it would instead be filled with a gift much greater — healing, restoration, and new life — and all that in the matchless and powerful name of Jesus. Isn't that amazing?

I am reminded of the words of Ephesians 3:20-21 — “Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! Amen.” Now isn't that the way God works? We come to Him expecting Him to fill our cups with a little bit of grace, a little bit of love, a little bit of whatever it is we need, but He wants to fill our cups full to overflowing with the fullest measure of His love and grace. That's what He did for that crippled beggar. And just think, that's what He longs to do for you! Will you hold out your cup and let him fill it?

Thursday, April 2, 2020

Read Acts 4:1-31.

Facing Opposition

Acts 4:29-30 — “Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your words with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

Negativity breeds negativity. We see that every day through various media forums. But we also see how positivity can breed positivity. One random act of kindness or one good deed can trigger many other people to do likewise. Frankly, we have a choice how we respond to what is before us every day and the attitude we choose

It's hard to imagine the negative response that came following the wonderful miracle of the healing of the man who had been crippled from birth. The man had literally been set free from an ailment that had not only kept him from enjoying life but that had also kept him from being a productive member of society. He required people to bring him to a place where he could beg. He was totally dependent on others to provide his every need. The day that Peter and John reached out to him as he sat begging at the temple gate was a day that would change his life forever in a wonderful and positive way.

Peter addressed the crowds that came running to see the spectacle. — a crippled man had been healed, and they wanted to see for themselves. He saw it as a wonderful opportunity to share the greater news of salvation through Jesus Christ. He urged those in the crowd to repent of their sins and turn to God.

The priests and the captains of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed that these men were teaching and preaching about Jesus Christ, so they seized Peter and John and had them thrown in the jail until the next day. Many who heard the message believed.

The next day, the rulers, elders, and teachers of the law met in Jerusalem. They

asked Peter and John “By what power or what name did you do this?” (Acts 4:7) This had to be greatly confusing to those leaders as none of them had the power or ability to do such miracles. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, unashamedly explained that it was by the name of Jesus that that miracle had taken place. The leaders were baffled by the boldness of those men. They knew those two were uneducated men who had kept company with Jesus, but they could not argue with the miracle that had taken place.

The leaders wanted to stop the spread of the teaching about Jesus and commanded the disciples to no longer speak or teach to anyone in the name of Jesus. The disciples knew that if they had to choose, they would choose to obey God not men. In fact, they prayed that God would give them great boldness to continue to speak and teach and do the work they had been called to do in spite of the opposition they were facing. After they had prayed, God’s Holy Spirit came on them in even greater power. And just think: the more opposition they faced, the bolder they became, and even more people found the Lord!

I would encourage you today to pray for those who are facing opposition as they serve the Lord. Pray also for boldness to share Christ with others.

Friday, April 3, 2020

Read Acts 5:1-11

A Lesson in Truth

Acts 5:1-2 — “Now a man named Ananias together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife’s full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles’ feet.”

Why do people lie? Now that’s a good question. Some lie to protect themselves or others. Some lie to make themselves look good — or to make themselves look better than others. Some have lived a lie so long that they can no longer differentiate between lies or falsehood and the truth.

In the early church, there were many who struggled to provide for themselves and their families. Numerous individuals sold homes or pieces of property and brought the proceeds from the sales to the apostles who then distributed it to anyone who had a need. Several individuals in particular are named. The first was Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, who was also known as Barnabas. He sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet.

The second one was a couple named Ananias and Sapphira. It’s interesting to note that Ananias and Sapphira had also sold a piece of property. With his wife’s full knowledge Ananias kept back part of the money for himself and brought the rest of the money and put it at the apostles’ feet. Peter addressed him when he did so, revealing his deceptiveness. The bottom line was that he could have done whatever he wanted to with the money, but he deliberately chose to lie about what he was giving to the Lord’s work. He falsely claimed that he was giving *everything* he had received from the sale of the property when in reality he was holding some back for himself. Not only did he lie, but he collaborated with his wife, so that she went along with the lie and the deception. Peter

knew that Satan — the author and father of lies — had so filled that man’s heart that he had lied to the Holy Spirit. He warned him that he had not lied to men but to God. When Ananias heard Peter’s words, he fell down dead.

About 3 hours later, his wife came in. Peter asked her if that was the amount they had received for the land. She said, “Yes, that is the price.” Peter said to her, “How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord! Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also!” (Acts 5:9) At that moment, she fell down at his feet and died. The result was that great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about this incident.

Is there a lesson for us in this story? Indeed there is. Some people do have a hard time differentiating between truth and lies. There are those who lie for various reasons. Some do it to save face or to make themselves look better than others. Some lie out of malice or spite. We need to remember that lies are the devil’s handiwork. They are not from God. Ultimately God knows the truth, and He wants His people to be people of truth. In John 8:32, Jesus declared: “Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” He wants us each to know the freedom that comes from knowing His truth!

Saturday, April 4, 2020

Read Acts 8:9-25.

A Gift is a Gift

Acts 8:17 — “Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.”

Have you ever given somebody a gift and then have them turn around and offer to pay for it? Or has somebody ever given you a gift, and you in turn offered them money for the gift? Let’s be clear here what a gift is. A gift is something freely given out of the goodness and kindness of a person’s heart. That gift should be accepted and received with gratitude and graciousness.

In the verses prior to our Scripture reading for today, Philip had gone down to a town in Samaria where he proclaimed Christ to the people. When the crowds heard the message of Christ, and when they saw the miraculous signs that Philip was doing there, their hearts were filled with great joy. In fact, great joy filled the whole city for people there were being healed from various physical ailments and many were being delivered from evil spirits. Those who received Christ were being baptized. Revival had broken out in Samaria.

Now there was a man in that city by the name of Simon who had for some time practiced sorcery in that town. He amazed the people there with his sorcery and even boasted about how great he was. Simon also believed and was baptized.

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard what was happening in Samaria, they sent Peter and John to them. Peter and John prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. Up to that point they had not yet received the Holy Spirit. They had only been baptized in the name of Jesus. Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

Now Simon was amazed that people had received the Holy Spirit when the apostles had laid hands on them and prayed over them. He even offered them money so that he could

receive the ability and gift to give the Holy Spirit to others just by laying hands on them. Peter rebuked him very sharply, “May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.” (Acts 8:20-23) Simon urged the apostles to pray for him lest the things they had said would befall him

There was an important lesson Simon needed to learn, and a lesson we need to acknowledge as well. God cannot be bought with money, nor can His gifts be bought with money. The gift of salvation and the gift of the forgiveness of sins are given freely to all who come to Him in simple faith. They cannot be bought, earned, or received any other way than through simple faith in Jesus and acceptance of Him. The same is true of the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is given to those who receive Him.

While we’re at it, have you received the gift of the Holy Spirit? If you have, rejoice. If you have not, will you open your heart to Him, and will you ask the Holy Spirit to come in and fill your heart today?

Sunday, April 5, 2020

Read Acts 9:32-43.

A Miracle of Life

Acts 9:39 — “Peter went with them, and when he arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.”

My mother taught Sunday School for many years. She adored the 4 and 5 year old children whom she taught. One of her favorite Bible stories was one of the ones in our Scripture reading today — the story of Dorcas.

As Peter travelled about the country, he went to visit the believers in Lydda. There he found a man named Aeneas who was a paralytic who had been bedridden for 8 years. Peter told him, “Jesus Christ heals you. Get up and take care of your mat.” *Immediately* healing came and Aeneas got up. Just imagine, that man had been paralyzed for a very long time. In fact, we are told he had been bedridden for 8 long years. When Peter arrived, all that changed for Aeneas. God used Peter in a mighty way to bring healing to Aeneas. An even greater miracle took place, though, when all those who lived in that area saw what happened and turned to the Lord putting their faith in Him.

There was also a woman in Joppa by the name of Tabitha or Dorcas who had a reputation for doing good and helping the poor. She took quite ill and died. Her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. Since Lydda was not far from Joppa, and since the disciples heard that Peter was in Lydda, they sent two men to Lydda to urge Peter to come to Joppa.

Now Peter had witnessed Jesus during His earthly ministry raise several individuals to life. It would be interesting to see how Peter would respond when faced with such a crisis. After all, Jesus was the Son of God. He had the ability to heal and raise people

from the dead. But, Peter was not Jesus.

When Peter arrived in Joppa, he found the room where Dorcas' body had been placed filled with widows who were weeping in distress over the loss of that precious woman. Those widows weren't just weeping; they were also showing off the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made for them while she was well. Her kindness and good deeds had blessed so many lives.

Peter sent everybody out of the room, then he got down on his knees and prayed. After he had prayed, he turned to the dead woman and commanded her, "Tabitha, get up!" She opened her eyes, and seeing Peter there, she sat up. He took her by the hand and helped her to her feet. He then called the widows and other believers and presented her to them alive. It's not hard to imagine the joy that replaced the grief in that room. Oh, what a wonderful celebration must have followed that amazing miracle!

A man had been healed, and a woman had been raised to life. People all around that area heard the wonderful news of those miracles, and many people came to believe in Jesus as a result. The result of those miracles was not glory being given to Peter — but glory being given to God and people finding Jesus as Savior and Lord! Wow! Praise the Lord!

May I challenge you— give God the glory for all He has done for you!

Monday, April 6, 2010

Read Acts 10.

Loving Those Who are Not Like us

Acts 10:34-35 — "Then Peter began to speak: 'I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.'"

I recently discovered a wonderful devotional book written by Bob Goff entitled *Live in Grace: Walk in Love*. It is written very simply, but it's probably the most challenging devotional book I have ever read. The premise of the book is that those of us who have experienced God's love and grace need to in turn extend that same grace and love to others, especially to those who are not like us. You know as well as I do, that it's easy to love those who are just like us, who have the same background, same likes, and same disposition. It can be a lot more challenging to reach out to and love those who are different from us.

As we come to Acts 10, we find Peter facing that kind of a dilemma. He was a Jew through and through, one of Jesus' disciples, and a leader in the early church. Cornelius was a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing, gave generously to those in need, and prayed regularly to God — but He was a Gentile. In that day, in that culture, and in that part of the world, there were 2 main categories of people — the Jews (God's chosen people who had been blessed with the Law, the Prophets, and the covenants), and the Gentiles who were considered aliens, foreigners, and strangers to the things of God. The two just did not associate with the other. As we will discover, God's provision of salvation would supersede those barriers.

Now God sent an angel of the Lord to Cornelius and urged him to send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Peter who was staying there. He immediately sent 2 of his servants and a devout soldier to Joppa to find Peter. In the meantime, God was preparing Peter's heart for that encounter through a vision in which he was being challenged to kill and eat animals, reptiles, and birds that were unclean for Jews to eat. Peter vehemently objected

to doing such a thing. God spoke to Peter again and told him “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.” When the men sent by Cornelius arrived looking for Peter, the Spirit of God urged him to go back with them to Cornelius’ house.

When Peter arrived at Cornelius’ house and shared the message of Jesus, the Holy Spirit of God came with great power on those gathered there. They not only believed in Jesus, but they were filled with the Holy Spirit and were baptized in the name of Jesus. There were those who did not fully understand what happened that day, but as Peter shared the wonderful news and explained his actions, many marveled that God did not show favoritism and that “God had granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.” (Acts 11:18)

Isn’t it wonderful that God does not show favoritism but accepts everybody who comes to Him? Isn’t it marvelous that God’s love and grace are that far-reaching? Let’s pause today and ask God to give us a heart like His that loves others and that gladly shares His grace with those in need — even if they are different from us. Then ask God who He wants you to reach out to today.

Tuesday, April 7, 2020

Read Acts 15:1-35.

A Good Problem in the Early Church

Acts 15:19 — “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.”

Wherever you have people, you are bound to have problems. We don’t all look alike, think alike, or have the same preferences. Years ago, in a Sunday School class led by Jim Groves, we studied a book entitled *Christians in Conflict* by Everett Leadingham. The main thrust of the book was to help Christians handle conflict and disagreements in a Christ-like manner.

The early church was facing an issue that resulted from people from many different backgrounds coming to faith in Jesus Christ. It was one thing when the new believers had all come from a Jewish background and knew the requirements of the law in regard to circumcision, requirements regarding which foods were acceptable to eat and which were not, and requirements regarding what to do with foods that had been sacrificed to idols. The Jewish believers were very strict in regard to these matters, because they had been taught them and had lived according to them from the time they were infants. Now many Gentiles were coming to receive Christ, and they did not live according to the Jewish laws or traditions. Some of the believers who were Pharisees wanted the Gentile believers to follow all of the Jewish laws and rituals in order to be Christians. Peter, on the other hand, argued that in sharing the message of Christ with the Gentiles, they had believed from their hearts and had been accepted by God and been given the gift of the Holy Spirit without first following Jewish regulations in regard to circumcision and the like. Oh, what a dilemma the early church was facing!

In Acts 15, we learn that a decision was finally made at a Council in Jerusalem.

The Gentiles would not have to be circumcised in order to become Christians. However, they were asked to refrain from certain things that were an abomination to the Jewish believers and to basically do so out of respect for their fellow believers who had come from a Jewish background. They were to abstain from food that had been offered to idols, sexual immorality, and the meat of strangled animals and blood. A letter was drafted and sent back to Antioch where some of the conflict had begun. There they gathered the church together and shared the decision of the Jerusalem Council. The believers there were greatly encouraged.

Do we deal with such issues today? Maybe not the same kind of issues, but where there are people, there is often conflict. The goal should always be unity and harmony achieved through Christian love and mutual respect. Easy? Not always! But with Christ's love in our hearts, we can work together toward that common goal. May God help us!

Wednesday, April 8, 2020

Read Galatians 2:11-21.

A Call To Consistent Living

Galatians 2:11 — “When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong.”

When I think about consistent living, I can't help but think of some of the older folks who attended our church when I was growing up. John and Marion Banker, in particular, stand out in my mind. They owned and operated Banker's Orchards for many years. They regularly and faithfully attended our little church. They taught Sunday School and served in various positions. What they were on Sunday, they were on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and the rest of the week. Consistency marked their lives through and through.

Apparently, Peter had a problem with consistency. When he was with the Gentiles, he acted one way. He treated them with the respect they deserved. However, when some believers from the circumcision group (those of Jewish background) came along, his behavior changed to fit that group. He was like a chameleon that changes its colors to fit its environment. Paul addressed Peter and clearly told him that what he was doing was not right. He could not be one way with the Gentiles in the absence of Jewish believers and then another way when the Jewish believers came along. He was not being consistent. He was instead seeking the approval of those he was with.

It took courage for Paul to address another leader about improper behavior. He observed behavior that was not appropriate, and he addressed it. He also made it

clear that Peter had taken a step backwards in what he was doing and that his conduct was not consistent with his teaching. He needed to admit his sin and repent and change his behavior. He also reminded him that the law could not save him. Only Christ could do that.

Paul closed by giving Peter — and, may I add, us — this powerful reminder: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing.” (Galatians 2:20-21) The key to consistent living is not found in us. It is found in Christ who lives within us. Praise the Lord!

As you look at your own life, how do you measure up? What do others see? What does God see? Have you indeed died to your own selfish longings or need for approval so that you can truly live a God honoring life? May God help each of us to truly die to self, so we can live for our Lord!

Thursday, April 9, 2020

Read Acts 12:1-19.

Escape!

Acts 12:5 — “So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.”

Escape from prison! Now that sounds familiar, doesn't it? In 2015, Joyce Mitchell, a seamstress at Clinton Correctional Facility in Dannemora, NY, helped two convicted felons (Richard Matt and David Sweat) escape the maximum security prison. A nerve-racking manhunt ensued leaving Richard Matt dead and David Sweat eventually captured.

As we come to Acts 12, we find that King Herod had arrested some who belonged to the church intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw how much this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize the Apostle Peter. After arresting him, he put him in prison intending to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. While Peter was in prison, the church was earnestly praying to God for him. (By the way, don't ever underestimate the power of a praying church.)

The night before Herod was planning to bring Peter to trial, while the church was praying, and while Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, with sentries standing guard at the entrance, something amazing happened. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell. The angel struck Peter on the side to wake him up and urged him to get up. The chains fell off Peter's wrists. The angel urged him to put on his clothes and sandals and to wrap his cloak around himself and follow the angel out of the cell. Peter followed him out of the cell, then out of the prison, past the

first and second guards and to the iron gate leading to the city. The gate opened for them by itself, and they walked through it. When they had walked the length of one street, the angel left him. Peter thought he had been dreaming or was seeing a vision, but he soon realized that God had indeed sent His angel to deliver him.

Coming to his senses, Peter made his way to the house of Mary, the mother of John, also called Mark, where people were gathered praying for him. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. She was overjoyed to hear Peter's voice and ran back to tell the others that Peter was at the door. They told her that she must be out of her mind. After all, if he was at the door, why didn't she let him in? Peter continued to knock. When they finally opened the door, they were astonished to see Peter standing in front of them, free and unbound. He quietly told them what had happened and urged them to tell James and the brothers about his deliverance, then he quickly left for another place before his escape had been discovered.

There was mass confusion the next morning when it was discovered that Peter was no longer in the prison. The guards were questioned and ordered executed. But Peter was free thanks to the Lord's miraculous intervention.

Sometimes the Lord works in mysterious ways to protect His children! Rejoice today in the wonderful ways God has taken care of you!

Friday, April 10, 2020

Read 1 Peter 1:3-9.

Refined by Fire

1 Peter 1:6-7 — “In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

It's hard to see the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel when you are in the midst of a difficult trial or a stormy season of life. Trials can cause so much untold grief, pain, heart-ache, and suffering. It's hard to rejoice when your whole world is falling apart. Sometimes it's even hard to hold on to one's faith. Just ask the Apostle Peter. Jesus had warned him that Satan had asked to sift him as wheat, but He had assured Peter of His prayers for him that his faith would not fail.

When Peter penned the words of 1 Peter 1:3-9, believe me, he was speaking from personal experience. He had faced numerous trials and times of testing as a disciple being taught and trained by Jesus. The greatest test or difficulty was when he had adamantly declared that he did not know Jesus. When he had heard the rooster crow, and when he had seen the gaze of Jesus, his heart broke with anguish and pain knowing that he had been unfaithful to His Master. With great sorrow and regret, he went out and wept bitterly. Jesus, however, had been good to him and had given him the opportunity to find restoration and a fresh start.

After Pentecost, the tests and trials came in the form of opposition and persecution. Even in the face of that opposition and persecution, as a follower of Jesus

and as a leader in the early church, he faithfully proclaimed the good news of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Many people came to faith in God as a result of his faithful preaching. God used him in other ways as well. Through him and his ministry, many found healing and at least one was raised from the dead. Peter had gone through some fiery tests and trials, but through those trials, God had worked powerfully in Peter's heart and life. Through those trials, Peter's faith was refined. Through those trials, his commitment to the Lord was firmly established. Through those difficulties, he gained a love and compassion for others who were struggling. He had finally become the rock Jesus had predicted he would become. The end result wasn't praise bestowed on Peter, but praise, glory, and honor would be brought to God as Peter lived out what Jesus had taught him and the other disciples.

What about us? What about me? What about you? How do we handle the trials that come our way? Can we — do we — see them as God's opportunities to work in us, to refine our faith, and to shape our character so that we become more and more like our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? Will we rejoice that God is faithfully working in us? Will we rejoice that God is using us to impact others with the Good News of the Gospel?

Saturday, April 11, 2020

One Final Word

2 Peter 3:18 — “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen!”

I hope and pray that you have been as blessed as I have been as we have walked our through this Lenten season and as we have studied the life of one of Jesus' most prominent disciples — the Apostle Peter. It has certainly been an intriguing and amazing study.

When Jesus first chose Peter, he wasn't much to look at. He was a burly, loud-mouthed, head-strong, impetuous fisherman. He wasn't afraid to speak his mind, to jump over the side of a boat and attempt to walk on water, to make great boasts, and to blunder ahead without weighing the cost. Yet Jesus saw potential in that rugged man. And day after day, week after week, and month and month, Jesus worked with Peter, training him in His ways, teaching him to do His work, and giving him opportunities to stretch his faith and grow into a rock-solid individual who would and could help shape and influence the early church. When the Holy Spirit came upon Peter at Pentecost, he was changed, transformed, and truly empowered to do the work Christ had called him to do. He would preach forceful sermons, heal the sick, raise the dead, and lead many to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. He would be misunderstood, persecuted, and imprisoned, but he would hold strong and steadfast in his faith and in his commitment to the Lord. Eventually, he would be put to death for his faith. Historians and Bible scholars tell us that Peter, refusing to die in the same manner as his Lord, insisted on being crucified upside-down. He considered it a great honor and privilege to die in service to the One who died for him.

As we wrap up this Lenten Devotion, I want to leave you with one final thought, one final word. It just happens to be the final exhortation in the second epistle attributed to the Apostle Peter. Actually, he begins the second epistle with a challenge to grow — and he

concludes that little epistle with a challenge to grow. We are going to focus on the latter.

We all know that whatever is alive and not growing is either stagnant, dying, or already dead. There are certain things that contribute to growth for all living things — proper nutrition, water, and sunlight. As Christians who have received Jesus as our Savior and Lord, we need to continue to grow by reading God's Word, spending quality time in prayer and fellowship with the Lord, actively participating in worship, enjoying Christian fellowship, and serving the Lord and others. Peter adds that we must do everything we can to grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. We have to be in a place spiritually where we can learn, grow, and mature. Our hearts and spirits must be open and sensitive to the Lord's leading. We must have a teachable spirit. But we must also let God do His work in us.

Peter was only able to be used mightily by God, because he willingly let God grow him, mold him, shape him, change him, and develop him into a leader for His kingdom. Will you let God mold you and shape you and use you in His kingdom? Will you allow Him to grow you into a person He can use?