

Winsome

Loving to Share the Good News

A Life-Question Devotional Guide *"How worn is my welcome mat?"*



prepared by

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Winsome – Loving to Share the Good News

A “How worn is my welcome mat?” devotional

DO WE LOVE TO SHARE THE GOOD NEWS?

The Bible is a library of books, full of inexhaustible revelation breathed out by God Himself (2 Timothy 3:16). Human authors were superintended by the Holy Spirit to reveal God’s truth to all who are made in His image.

Is this library aligned? Does it share a central theme exhibiting the purposeful and passionate heart of God? What is the Bible all about?

At the heart of this inspired collection is **the story of God’s rescue of sinful and rebellious people**. Jesus said, “The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10).

That’s us. Every one of us and all of us. We all are sinful and rebellious, independent of heart, stubborn, and consequently, morally and spiritually lost. From the inside-out and often allowing the outside-world-in, we are full of condemning sin (Romans 3:9-20), bereft of the holiness “without which no one will see the Lord” (cf. Hebrews 12:14). “All of us, like sheep, have gone astray...” Isaiah candidly insists. “We have turned every one to his own way” (Isaiah 53:6). Our own, independent way is the wrong way. And, in step with the Author of Sin (i.e. Satan), our pride too frequently and far too successfully urges we not admit our problem before God and with each other.

But, we cannot rescue ourselves. Atheism and agnosticism, along with all of the “work-at-it” religious systems, have no viable solution to the evil in which we live and the hurt we inflict on one another. Nonetheless, we can be rescued from these things, and subsequently genuinely help in the effort of rescuing others. Our present lives need not end in the frustration of physical demise and death; they can be empowered by God’s saving gift of eternal life.

The Bible’s volumes from start to finish call this “salvation.” Psalm 3:8 sings, “Salvation belongs to the Lord.” In sin we would run and hide in creation’s bushes; yet God himself comes calling out, “Where are you?” He seeks us in our embarrassment and shame. And, after He rescues us, by His grace, we follow God the Son who is the “Savior.” Someone who saves us, changes us from the inside-out, and calls us to join in His Spirit-empowered, ongoing, life-saving initiative toward others.

ARE YOU SAVED?

As you open this devotional guide, may I first inquire if the Savior has rescued you?

Please. Don’t dismiss this inquiry as offensive. If offended by such an

inquiry, it is a pride reaction we do best to immediately set aside. Being saved requires humility.

If you are saved, your response to that question likely came quickly. “Yes...I can remember when I realized how sinful I was, and how Jesus – the innocent Lamb of God -- died for my sin on His brutal cross. I chose to believe He died for my sin, and rose alive from the grave days later in victory. I am saved because I trust in God’s promise that Jesus paid it all. All to Him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain; He washed it white as snow. I have earned nothing; by grace God has rescued me through faith” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

NOT SAVED?

If you did not answer the question quickly, it could be that you’ve never come to that moment of realization and simple faith. What realization? The realization that it is what Christ has done for you, not what you have done for Him.

You may still be trusting (that’s what the Biblical word faith means) in your own good works, your church attendance, your childhood baptism or confirmation, perhaps generous giving to some charity or church... something you have done which you have come to believe merits God’s forgiveness. You somehow believe that you have lived better than others, that in the end God “grades on a curve,” and you think yourself near the top. “If anyone gets into heaven, I surely will” is the source of your confidence. In short, you think you can save yourself.

Allow me to be frank. You can’t. The Bible could not be clearer. God indeed loves each one of us, but our moral report card reads “F.” We’ve flunked. “There is none righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10). “For by the works of the Law no human being will be justified in God’s sight” (Romans 3:20). “All have sinned; all have fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Ugh!

You and I need to be perfect, because God’s glorious holiness and righteousness is perfect. And, you’re not. Neither am I. All means all. We all are in the same sinful set. Which means I need to be rescued, as you do.

Here’s the Good News. God’s rescue is free. It truly happens in the moment any one of us says in trusting sincerity to God, “Rescue me!” A moment of genuine faith, to which God responds with the rescue of forgiveness (Ephesians 1:3-11), and the promise you are now forever in His family and sharing His eternal life. “For God so loved the world... that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

USING THIS DEVOTIONAL

This devotional guide has been crafted for three purposes.

First, it is to help anyone understand HOW ONE CAN BE SAVED. There are devotionals dedicated to “The Good News which Saves.”

Second, it is to help those who are saved BETTER UNDERSTAND WHAT HAS HAPPENED when he or she trusted Christ. God not only forgives the believing sinner, but makes him or her a child of God (which means a growing up in God’s family). There are devotionals for “The Difference the Good News Makes.”

Third, to help all of us develop a passion for LOVING TO SHARE THE GOOD NEWS. Oddly, many Christians admit they struggle to love others and confidently share the good news which can rescue. A section entitled “Loving to Share the Good News” offers help to become confident in being the Savior’s ambassadors.

I’ll never forget the moment the Savior rescued me as a 9 year old with a filthy mouth and a bullying heart. When I came up off my knees, a boulder of sin was lifted from my heart. I could breathe, spiritually, for the first time, experiencing the new life the Spirit was creating inside. What followed were years of growing, and loving the joys of my salvation.

I trust that will be your experience as well, perhaps facilitated by these pages. They are offered humbly. With the Savior, let’s learn to love to share the good news of salvation.

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SECTION 1

*The Good News
Which Saves*

*The matter of our sin
The provision of a Savior
Receiving the Savior's gift*

A resume of self-righteousness or humility?

Luke 18:9-14

Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

There are two kinds of people in the world of humanity.

There are those who believe that they are “good enough.” Whatever measuring stick they have chosen to use, they have concluded that they indeed measure up. And, if there is a God who will hold them to account, they believe they have done enough, been good enough, have personally sacrificed enough, and have by comparison surpassed others enough to merit applause from God. The doorway into heaven will automatically swing wide open to them when they are finally called above. Such was the attitude of this Pharisee. He stands apart to pray (or is it “to declare”), repeats his resume of self-righteousness, and expects a divine “Atta boy!” from the Almighty.

Unfortunately for him, and anyone who like him proudly trusts in himself, such a person returns home blindly self-deceived. Should life end, the only doors automatically opening are the gates of hell.

But there are those who, enlightened by humility, profoundly realize their need before a holy God. No self-promotion erases sin’s weight or penalty. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, it is brokenness and confession which opens heaven’s gates even to the worst of sinners. So says the Savior who often taught and modeled that “the way up is the way down.”

Question:

Honestly, when you contemplate standing before God one day, do you anticipate presenting your resume of good works which have earned you heaven and eternal life, or will you begin by beating your breast in humility?

Thoughts:

Prayer:

Holy God, am I humble enough to admit my sin need to you...

Luke 18:14

“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The truth about all of us, including me

Romans 3:9-18

What then? Are we Jews any better off?

No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written:

“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes.

Let’s face it. No one wants to find herself or himself in the description above. In fact, we are readily inclined to minimize it, thinking it hyperbole. Others dismiss it, insisting that human beings are born basically good, only to be skewed by the debilitating influences of environment and culture.

But, quite frankly, the Swiss Protestant reformer John Calvin had it right. In *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536) he noted, “He who is most deeply abased and alarmed, by the consciousness of his disgrace, nakedness, want, and misery, has made the greatest progress in the knowledge of himself.”

That we are capable of thinking good and beautiful things, and able to learn to act in beneficial and even loving ways is tribute to our Creator’s imparted image (Cf. Genesis 1:26-27). The sinning chosen by our ancient parents (Adam and Eve) did not destroy the image of God in humanity, but it did deeply scar and mar it. Every one of their offspring is a sinner by nature and a sinner by choice, and the description from Romans 3 – a compilation of statements largely from many of the Psalms – presents without apology God’s accurate assessment of what goes on in our hearts and is expressed through the capabilities of our bodies.

It does not help us to minimize or dismiss our odious condition before God. The first step in finding God’s saving help is to admit our desperate estate.

Question:

When surrounded by so many seemingly “good” people, do I find it difficult to speak of our true condition before a holy God? How important is it that I affirm in people both God’s image stamped on us, but also the reality of our crippling sin?

Thoughts:

Prayer:

Holy Spirit, You have the responsibility to convict of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8-11). I need help in...

Romans 3:12

All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.

Sin has driven us from God

Genesis 2:15-17

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

Genesis 1-2 are filled with descriptions that easily generate wonder in the imagination. This brief narrative pulsates with divine word, power, form and then fullness, incomprehensible creativity. A universe of stars declaring the power of God, a planet of life exhibiting the biological artistry of God.

The earth in infancy sported an instantly mature turn-key homestead for the male, a garden of trees, flowers, food and beauty. It, along with the diversity of the animal kingdom, was all Adam’s to manage and use in worship of his Creator. Every tree available, save one, that Adam’s capacity for obedient, moral choice could itself grow and mature, reaping the compounding benefits of obedience to God. Life, experiencing vibrant life in all of its forms, from the God of life, was the prospect.

Why would anyone choose the intrusion of death in such a setting?

But, of course, that is what Eve and Adam did (Genesis 3:1-7). Naïve and deceived, they chose to believe and then act as if there was more life to be experienced in rebellious disobedience rather than in eager obedience. But disobeying the single, divine command brought nothing but confusing shame, hearts pierced through with guilt, and feet which ran rapidly to hide from the Creator behind the provided creation. Sin brought so much death – death of an open relationship with God, death of a once cooperative natural order, death of a shameless marriage, and death (eventually) of one’s physical body (cf. James 1:13-15). Death reigns through sin.

Sin. It has driven every generation before us from God. It has driven my generation from God. And, if I am personally honest, it has driven me from God. Crouching and confused in the bushes, I need a God who comes looking; a God who can rescue and redeem. A Creator who alone can do what needs to be done. To save.

Question:

Have I been driven and distanced from God by my sin? Have I admitted this – difficult and humbling as it may be – or am I yet hiding behind the bushes of my possessions?

Thoughts:

Prayer:

Take from me, Lord, any tendency from my thinking to believe that more life might be found in disobeying you, than in obeying...

Job 13:23

How many are my iniquities and my sins? Make me know my transgression and my sin.

The prospect of dying in your sins

John 8:21-29

So Jesus said to them again, “I am going away, and you will seek me, and you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come.” So the Jews said, “Will he kill himself, since he says, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come’?” He said to them, “You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.”

So Jesus said to them, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. And He who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him.”

The Jewish Pharisees were the alleged spiritual heavy-weights of Jesus’ era. Rigid separatists from anything that hinted at *ceremonial* impurity, they attempted to flawlessly follow God’s laws and all attached traditions. If anyone had a shot at God’s approval and a blissful life in the hereafter of Abraham’s bosom, most agreed these 6,000 (Josephus’ estimate) had an inside track.

Jesus, however, declared that they were likely “to die in their sins.” And for this, they hated him. He dared to suggest that for all their self-effort law-and-tradition-keeping, they still had an advanced sin problem. Every one of them. No exception. Reputation aside, they were not perfect.

And, they would, as Jesus stated, *lift him up* (a reference to the Nazarene’s eventual crucifixion in Jerusalem, cf. John 3:14). When that happened, the only way the snake-bite of sin in their lives could be cured was if they would believe in Him (John 3:15-16). But if they refused to set aside confidence in their own efforts of obedience and religiosity – if they refused to believe that God the Father had sent him, and if they refused to believe He was dying for *their* sins – they themselves would die in their sins.

Every day, those who keep trusting in their own righteousness and refuse to believe in Christ Jesus, are dying in their sins. And you? Should you unexpectedly die, would it be “in” your sins, or “forgiven” of your sins?

Question:

How do I know that I will not “die in my sins”? What can give me confidence in death, and my standing before God at the judgment (cf. Hebrews 9:27)? And with whom might the Spirit want me to share this?

Thoughts:

Prayer:

Holy Spirit, will you create in me a fresh urgency to share with others who may be at present likely to die in their sins...

John 3:16

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

Sin's consequential penalties are serious stuff

Psalm 32 and 51

For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.

Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your word, and blameless in your judgment.

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice. Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

The portions above found in Psalm 32 and 51 were written by David in response to Nathan the prophet's courageous confrontation. He had confronted the King about sins of adultery, murder, and deception. David's songs of confession are poignant, pointing to how sin ruinously destroys everything it touches – our position before and fellowship with God, our relationships, our peace of mind, even our physical health. The Lord actively disciplines when sin occurs. The heaviness of God's hand can be crushing. Joy and gladness are in short supply; God's face is turned away.

David even admits that from birth he has been "in iniquity," and thus even more keenly feeling the need for deep cleaning, the kind of washing only God can do...*and will do* when we humbly confess and request.

"All sin," writes Cornelius Plantinga (*Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*) has first and finally a Godward force...it is a culpable and personal affront to a personal God. [But] God is, after all, not arbitrarily offended. God hates sin not just because it violates his law, but, more substantively, because it violates *shalom*, because it breaks the peace, because it interferes with the way things are supposed to be. In short, sin is culpable *shalom*-breaking."

"The wages of sin is death," Paul writes. Wages we'd rather not be paid.

Question:

I live in a societal culture that calls renames “sin” as mistakes, fiercely avoiding admitting, confessing, and seeking forgiveness of guilt and restoration of relationship with others or with God. Am I rightly assessing the destructive nature of my sin?

Thoughts:

Prayer:

Holy Lord, I’m not anxious to exhibit a condemning spirit, nor live with a negative cloud over my heart. Yet sin is serious, and I need your help with...

Psalm 32:5

I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,” and you forgave the iniquity *of my sin*. Selah

Can anyone expunge one's own record?

Ezekiel 18:19-21

“Yet you say, ‘Why should not the son suffer for the iniquity of the father?’ When the son has done what is just and right, and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live. The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself. But if a wicked person turns away from all his sins that he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is just and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die.”

A moment to reflect. Did you grow up in a home where the standards for honesty and integrity were clear? One in which you were aware of the penalty attached for a violation? I vividly recall how my mother once enforced a penalty attached to filthy, inappropriate speech. She took me to the back of the house, to the utility wash tub, ran water over a bar of soap, and stuck the bar squarely in my mouth, turning it over so that all of the available tastebuds were given opportunity. “That’s not how you use your mouth,” she said. “Time to clean it out.”

I spent a long time rinsing. *The mouth that sinneth, it will be soaped.* Ezekiel’s prophetic message underscores what God’s word makes clear from front to back. Sin is so awful, its penalty is more than simply a soap washing. Sin’s required penalty is death, and no amount of “I’ll try to be good from now on” will satisfy the penalty. Ezekiel does suggest that a flawless keeping of “all my (i.e., God’s) statutes,” a doing “what is just and right” would meet the legal requirement for avoiding death. But honestly, who can live flawlessly? Paul would later admit, “For by the works of the Law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20).

We each commit our own sin; we each owe sin’s penalty. No amount of approximate obedience can expunge our record before a holy God. And yet it is that same holy God who will not leave us in the bushes, will not let us die in our sin. Someone is sent to rescue from sin and death. To save.

Question:

So many around us believe that a general life of trying to be good will release us from the penalty of sin. Am I clear about this?

Thoughts:

Prayer:

Father, the reality of my sin and the penalty attached to it humbles and sobers me. Forgive me for taking sin lightly in my life...

Psalm 38:3

There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation;
there is no health in my bones because of my sin.

The required sin-sacrifice

Leviticus 4:32-35

If he brings a lamb as his offering for a sin offering, he shall bring a female without blemish and lay his hand on the head of the sin offering and kill it for a sin offering in the place where they kill the burnt offering. Then the priest shall take some of the blood of the sin offering with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering and pour out all the rest of its blood at the base of the altar. And all its fat he shall remove as the fat of the lamb is removed from the sacrifice of peace offerings, and the priest shall burn it on the altar, on top of the Lord's food offerings. The priest shall make atonement for him for the sin which he has committed, and he shall be forgiven.

Before the human Lamb of God (cf. John 1:29) ever arrived on the scene, his death-work for sin was vividly pictured in the Jewish *Torah*, the Old Testament law prescribing what a worshipper needed to do to have his/her personal sin "covered," or atoned for. In short, an innocent, spotless lamb had to die. The wages for sin is death. The sacrificial sin-offering procedures are detailed in Leviticus 4:1-5:13 for the priests to administrate.

One evening, years ago in a rural village in Uzbekistan, I watched an animal die to provide what I needed. Guests of a Muslim family, I along with others stood silently as one of the two goats the family owned was led from the fenced area. A hole was dug in the dirt courtyard. Its legs tied, the animal was laid on its side. When its head was pulled back, it uttered no sound. The throat was slit silently, the blood gushed into the hole, the body went limp. That night, I would be provided a special meal of nourishment, to sustain my life, at the expense of an innocent animal.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob revealed to Moses that sin's penalty for worshippers could be met if a spotless animal lost its life. God's holy justice could be satisfied, at least temporarily, until the final Sacrifice, the Lamb of God, would offer himself for us. In love for us, God brought the sacrifice that would take away our sin. He provided His Son. "Christ has appeared, once for all, at the end of the ages, to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself..." (Hebrews 9:26).

Question:

The requirements of sacrifice and blood are mostly far removed from our experience. Yet when life is lost and blood is shed, the awful price of sin recovers its impact within us. How well do I recognize the awful price tag that sin requires?

Thoughts:

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, you took my place in dying for sin...

Hebrews 10:4,12

It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. When Christ offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.

The Good News Which Saves — The Matter Of Our Sin

Journal Summary

Day 1 *A resume of self-righteousness or humility? — Luke 18:9-14*

Day 2 *The truth about all of us, including me — Romans 3:9-18*

Day 3 *Sin has Driven Us from God — Genesis 2:15-17*

Day 4 *The prospect of dying in your sins — John 8:21-29*

Day 5 *Sin's consequential penalties are serious stuff —
Psalm 32 and 51*

Day 6 *Can anyone expunge one's own record? – Ezekiel 18:19-21*

Day 7 *The required sin-sacrifice – Leviticus 4:32-35*

Best take away

Additional observations and reflections

The Light of the Lord's Salvation

Psalm 27:1-3

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

When evildoers assail me to eat up my flesh,
my adversaries and foes, it is they who stumble and fall.

Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear;

though war arise against me, yet I will be confident.

The good news of the Bible is simply wonderful, and wonderfully simple. The Author of the Bible is the Savior who loves to rescue people.

So what does that mean?

It means first that all of us, all of us who are human and making our way through the years of life given us, need to be rescued. Rescued from the condition of our hearts (Jeremiah 17:9, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"). Rescued from the destructive actions of evildoers (cf. Psalm 27:2). Rescued from deception and falsehood about life's most important issues (Matthew 18:6, 2 Peter 2:1-2). Rescued from the dangers which explode in a natural world of powerful forces (Matthew 8:23-27). Rescued from the enemy of death (Hebrews 2:15).

It means secondly that the rescues we all need are found in the God who made us (Psalm 139), sustains us (Acts 17:24-28), and calls us into a rescuing relationship with Himself (2 Corinthians 6:2). The Lord knows how to rescue us, and indeed desires to do so. Shortly after Adam and Eve sinned and hid, God personally stepped into the lush garden He had provided them, looking to bring them out of their guilt-driven hiding. The promise of a Savior was on His lips (Genesis 3:15).

In this confident Psalm, David revels in the joy of His Lord's salvation, in the security of a Divine stronghold. He trusts the Lord with what happens in the course of his life, especially when real threats and dangers press in. Three times fear is mentioned; each time fear is rejected. When someone entrusts his/her life to the Lord, the Lord loves to shine in saving and rescuing.

Question:

How would you describe the ways in which the Lord has rescued you? Take a moment to catalogue the ways God has saved you.

Thoughts:

Prayer:

Saving Lord, open my lips to tell of Your rescues in my life...

Psalm 25:5

Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day long.

On Him, the iniquity of us all

Isaiah 53:2-6

For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

The 39 “books” of the Old Testament came from the breath of God (2 Timothy 3:16) progressively, revealed and endowed to Israel over a span of 1,100 years. A unifying thread throughout was the anticipation of a special person who, arriving, would fulfill God’s promises of rescue and redemption. In Genesis 3:15, he is the “seed of the woman” who would crush the head of the “seed” of the serpent. In Deuteronomy 18:18 he would be the greatest Prophet. In 2 Samuel 7:12-16, he would be David’s King-Son on his throne. According to Hebrews 7 (cf. Genesis 14:18-20) he would be an enduring Priest after the order of Melchizedek.

So longed for, it was striking that the Spirit also spoke of Him as a sacrificed-for-the-sin-of-others lamb, through the mouth of Isaiah the prophet.. Someone who, almost unbelievably, would arrive humbly midst humanity, grow up in virtual obscurity, only to be soundly rejected by his own people, and fully immersed in undeserved sorrow, grief, and affliction. Crushed under sins that were not his own. Pierced for transgressions of the Law he never committed. Chastised, bruised and smitten by God for the rebellious, willful straying of every other human being.

This “long-expected” Person, born through David's line, took our iniquities in order that we might be healed of our incurable sin-wound, and given the peace of forgiveness and renewed relationship with God. On Him, my sin.

Question:

When thinking about how Jesus the Christ was unjustly pronounced guilty for sin he didn't commit, and brutalized for our sin until death, what do you anticipate saying to Him when meeting Him one day?

Thoughts:

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, I fear that the sin you died for I take too lightly...

Isaiah 53:10

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief, when his soul makes an offering for guilt.

A Savior who seeks and receives sinners

Luke 15:1-7

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying,

“This man receives sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable: “What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.”

Most non-religious, non-church-going people run from religious, church-going people. Friendships between them are rare. Interests don't line up. Conversation can get quickly uncomfortable because... well, because the religious, church-going people are often on a “You know, you should believe-and-do what I believe-and-do” mission.

Yet this latter group – the “religious, church-going people” – belong to a Someone who remarkably drew the non-religious to himself. They loved hanging out with Him; felt comfortable with his stories and the insightful, fresh wisdom that easily flowed from him. So much so, that the extreme-religious, synagogue-going crowd (i.e., the Pharisees) aimed their drive-by criticism at him. “He receives SINNERS! Good grief, he EATS WITH them!!” (a true sign of friendship, enjoying middle-eastern meals together).

Jesus explained. “I love sinners. Why don't you? They know they are lost. They need help. So I just go find them, and help them home. Like a shepherd missing a sheep, or a woman missing a coin (15:8-10). Like a father who deeply loves a wayward son (15:11-24). And when any one comes home, my Father and I throw a party with the angels!”

Jesus has no intention of letting his sacrifice for us go to waste. He loves us even in sin, comes looking for us, and eagerly offers, “Let's go home!” He's an unashamed Savior seeking to save that which is lost (Lk 19:10).

Question:

The stories Jesus told about God's heart for sinners are compelling. Do I share God's passion for people who are lost?

Thoughts:

Prayer:

Father, will you fan into flame your heart in mine for...

Luke 19:10

Jesus said to Zacchaeus, "Today salvation has come to this house...for the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Committed to bring us to God

1 Peter 3:17-19

For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison.

In his helpful work *How Long, O Lord?*, Donald Carson notes that "What is normal (for a Christian) is taking up one's cross and following Jesus; it is recognizing that in this fallen world, a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. That is inevitable. Decisions are made; the cost is cheerfully borne, and iron is bred in the soul."

In his letter to Christians in ancient, upper Asia, Peter is explaining this very reality to young Christians. God himself may direct that His own sons and daughters suffer for doing what is right, for living out holiness in an unholy environment. We battle the forces of evil. For even Christ Jesus, God the Son, experienced the same challenge.

Why? To what end? He suffered once (via his experience going to and dying on the cross) for the totality of humanity's sins. The righteous One substituted for a world of unrighteous ones. It wasn't fair and in one sense, it wasn't just or right. He deserved none of what He suffered. But he took on unjust suffering purposefully, "that He might bring us to God."

This is the very heart of the good news we must understand and then embrace in believing trust. I can be brought to God because the death penalty due my sins has been satisfied by the One who was willing to suffer unfairly. A way to come to God, forgiven and cleansed, has been forged by the Messiah, on whom our sin was laid (cf. Isaiah 53:6).

There is total victory in this, evidenced by what happened even as the Savior's body died. Made alive in his spirit, the Spirit reveals to Peter that the Savior proclaimed his victory over sin and death even in places where demonic, deceiving spirits are held until final judgment. Sin will not win in the coming eternal ages. Our Savior, as we believe, brings us to God.

Question:

Have I been brought to God by this substitute Savior? Do I understand, and have I embraced by faith, His death in my place?

Thoughts:

Prayer:

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for suffering by God's will for me...

1 Peter 1:3

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...

Of first importance, the Gospel which saves

1 Corinthians 15:1-5

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

The Bible makes a rather heady, if not startling claim. Simply this. If there is any message or set of ideas which ought to be in your mind and heart with crystal clarity, it is THE GOSPEL. No other message which you hear or receive will have such an eternity-changing impact on you than THE GOSPEL. Ignore it and you are lost for eternity. Understand it and embrace it by faith, and you become an inheritor of all that God has planned for eternity.

This is why Paul tells those living in the city of Corinth that he delivered THE GOSPEL as a matter of “first importance.” To say this differently, every other set of information gets in line behind THE GOSPEL. It is a message that must be proclaimed, believed, and held on to.

A careful reading of these verses shows the Gospel has 4 key elements.

- #1 Christ died for our sins, a fact which the Scriptures affirm
- #2 Christ was buried, a fact confirming His death
- #3 Christ was raised on the 3rd day, again as the Scriptures predicted and affirm
- #4 Christ appeared to witnesses (Cephas, the 12, others)

He died for our sins. He was truly dead. He came back to life, proven through multiple eye-witnesses. These facts, when internalized by believing trust, “save.” They rescue the believing person from sin, and usher the believing person into all that God has in store. THE GOSPEL.

Question:

When's the last time I've had the opportunity – or taken the opportunity – to explain the “first importance” Gospel to someone? Is there someone who now comes to mind with whom I might share it?

Thoughts:

Prayer:

This “first importance” message needs to be more important to me, good Spirit of God...

Colossians 4:3-4

At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ...that I might make it clear, which is how I ought to speak.

Rescued out of deadness into life

Ephesians 2:1-7

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses,

made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

Our 3-morning-a-week habit was to play basketball at 6:00 AM in the downtown city gym. Full-court games to 7 baskets; winners play again, losers sit out a game. A missed shot led to an outlet pass and a fastbreak, which, strangely, left behind a player. He let out a cry, then slumped lifeless just across the side line. His heart had stopped. No pulse. He was dead.

Matt, hovering over Eric's frame, sharply barked instructions to find the defibrillator. 9-1-1 was called. CPR began, the machine employed. To my amazement, personally unequipped for the moment, Matt brought him back to life. Eric would live many years because of the intervention.

Each one of us, before God's intervention, is an Eric. We were born with a spiritually dysfunctional heart. Living in trespasses and sins, following this age's spiritual mis-director like the rest of mankind, under God's wrath for sin, each of us were dead. All of us, before intervention, have no pulse.

But God. He alone can make the life-saving difference. His rich mercy, His great love can step in to *make us alive* and *raise us up* and *seat us in* the highest with Christ...for ages to come. Only the intervention of a God whose grace through Christ is immeasurable can rescue.

Question:

The Bible's description of our condition before being rescued in Christ is very sobering...or at least should be. How important is it to agree with the Spirit's description of the deadness of my spiritual condition?

Thoughts:

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, humble me about my need of Your life-giving intervening grace...

James 1:18

Of His own will, God brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.

Love which frees us from our sins

Revelation 1:4-7

John, to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of Him. Even so. Amen.

The last of the living, first century apostles was Jesus' closest human friend. John had first met this Jesus of Nazareth on the northern shoreline of the Sea of Galilee. The Nazarene would prove to John that he was God's genuine Messiah, would teach John how to fish for men, and invite John to be his closest confidant. Now, decades later and nearing his own finish line this side of heaven, John saw his friend again, the veil of mere humanity now glorified.

John knew Jesus in so many ways. In the opening lines of Scripture's concluding book, *the Revelation of Jesus Christ*, yet another array of descriptions flow. The Faithful Witness. The Firstborn of the dead. The Ruler of kings on earth. The One who loves us. The One who has made us a kingdom of priests to his God and Father. The One deserving glory and honor and dominion unending. The One coming with the clouds. The One whom all will see, even those who pierced him. The One who, in coming, will cause a wailing by those on earth unprepared for His arrival.

In the list, I lifted one to highlight. The One who has "freed us from our sins by his blood." Once again – and please do not miss this – we come out from under our sin's condemnation and penalty, and into a forgiven and redeemed relationship with God, one way. Because this remarkable Christ (i.e., Messiah) has died in our place, taking our penalty, and therefore can free us from our sins. And...so much more. Have you been freed?

Question:

Since Scripture is so repetitively clear on the only basis for our forgiveness – the shed blood of Jesus – how is it that so many still default to a thinking that insists that one’s good works will “save”?

Thoughts:

Prayer:

What can wash away my sin Nothing but the blood of Jesus...

Ephesians 1:7

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace.

*The Good News Which Saves –
The Provision Of A Savior*

Journal Summary

Day 8 *The Light of the Lord's Salvation – Psalm 27:1-3*

Day 9 *On Him, the iniquity of us all – Isaiah 53:2-6*

Day 10 *A Savior who seeks and receives sinners – Luke 15:1-7*

Day 11 *Committed to bringing us to God – 1 Peter 3:18-19*

Day 12 *Of first importance, the Gospel which saves –
1 Corinthians 15:1-5*

Day 13 *Rescued out of deadness into life – Ephesians 2:1-7*

Day 14 *Love which frees us from our sins – Revelation 1:4-7*

Best take away

Additional observations and reflections

Receive Him – Believe in His Name

John 1:9-12

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God

Light is amazing! What an understatement. It was God's first hope-filled creative move in a universe that, spoken into existence, was shrouded in darkness and chaos (Genesis 1:1-2). "Let there be light!" God directed, and its explosive brilliance moved God to pronounce His first "This is good!" Light brings warmth, life, power, clarity, and joy to all that we experience. Without it, we would die; with it we thrive.

It is no accident that John is moved by God's Spirit to identify the entrance of Jesus the Christ into the world as the arrival of the *true light*. The true light that everyone needs, or he/she will perish.

Yet John delineates a common reception problem, evident in two arenas. First, in the larger arena of the created world (i.e., all things created and all the living on planet earth, especially humanity), when its Creator personally arrived his creation "did not know him." Jesus of Nazareth, who proved his credentials as God-in-flesh through remarkable teaching and supernatural miracles, went largely unrecognized, and certainly un-acknowledged. The world-at-large did not comprehend nor acknowledge the Architect and Sustainer of our existence (cf. Hebrews 1:2-3).

Second, in the smaller arena of the Jewish nation, "his own" did not receive him. "Receive" is better translated "welcome and embrace." Stunningly, leveraging Roman muscle, Israel crucified her long-awaited "One."

Yet our most important life-opportunity remains viable. "To all who receive Him, who believe in His name, he gives the right to become children of God." To gain the gift of God, one must welcome Jesus, embrace what His name means ("God saves"). Choosing to receive Him, to believe in Him as one's Savior, is to have the Light of the World infuse your new life as a child of God with warmth, life, power, clarity, and joy.

Question:

When offered gifts through the generosity of others, it is important to receive such gifts with thanks. How does this help me understand what personally receiving Christ means?

Thoughts:

Prayer:

You are, Lord Jesus, the true Light. Right now, I receive you...

Psalm 36:7-9

The children of mankind...feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights. For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light.

Look and believe to have life from above

John 3:14-18

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” (Jesus)

His name was Nicodemus, and he was curious. John remembers that it was significant that he came to see Jesus “at night.” Simply put, though highly trained and practiced in Jewish religion, this teacher of Israel was in the dark. And yet he was personally fascinated with this young rabbi from Nazareth. “We know that you are a teacher come from God,” he begins (John 3:2). “The signs you are doing prove it.”

Actually, not all were convinced. The task of correctly sizing up Jesus was divisive in Jerusalem. Some were leaning away. Others were leaning in. Nicodemus, it seems, was in the latter bunch.

The Savior was in no mood for small talk. “You need to be born from above,” Jesus quickly insisted. “Without birth from above, you won’t ever see God’s kingdom.” A spiritual birth, life brought down from above, needed to happen. “Don’t be surprised. You must be born from above” (John 3:7).

Nicodemus wondered how, and the Host offered a familiar picture. “You remember, of course, how Moses lifted up the brass serpent when God’s people were dying of snake-bites (Cf. Numbers 21)? When they looked in faith on that which was lifted up, they lived. So I must be lifted up. Those who look in faith at me, lifted up for them on the cross, will live.”

Those stung-unto-death had a choice: *to look and live or to not look and die*. Jesus called this “looking” a *believing in Him*, a trusting in Him in order to be “saved through Him.” Receiving the Savior’s gift happens when someone looks up at Him, believing He can and will eternally save.

Question:

As is His habit, God provides what we cannot do for ourselves, in order to offer us His life. Which of the word-pictures in John 3 are most helpful to you when thinking about receiving the Savior's gift?

Thoughts:

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, thank you for releasing me from the condemnation of not believing in your name...

Isaiah 55:10-11

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, so shall my word be that goes out from My mouth...

Take a drink of Living Water

John 4:13-15

Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water."

In *The Day I Met Jesus*, Frank Viola and Mary Demuth imagine that the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well wrote a diary about her encounter with the Savior. Having failed in 5 marriages, and living with a 6th man in promiscuous circumstances, daily life was barren, chuck-full of unquenched thirsts. Little desiring to be the ongoing object of public scorn, she routinely fetched water at the worst time, in the noon-day heat. "My body memorized the routine," she remembers, "Walk the dusty road. Head down. Drop the earthen vessel into the well's deep throat. Lug and lurch its contents home - only to perform the same duty again and again and again. Old women shook their heads at me when I walked the town. Men leered."

Surprisingly at the well, she found herself alone with a Jewish traveler who, even more oddly, asked her to draw up a drink. Soon, the banter moved from well-water to living water, from the physical to the spiritual. The water he offered would (he claimed) never leave her thirsty again. Was he kidding? Serious? Rather than asking for a drink, he was now offering one.

A read of John 4 (it's worth it!) unveils a patient Savior, not seeking to argue or embarrass, but looking for an opportunity to quench a heart's desperate thirst. To let her know she could be forgiven, no longer defined by parasitic, destructive relationships. She could, in fact, become a true worshipper of a God who cared more about her future than her past. She needed a fresh draw of living water, and it could be hers if she would believe Jesus was God's saving Messiah.

Drink in living water. Believe, find true refreshment, in the water He alone can give. Believing in Him is drinking, and drinking is believing, trusting, delighting in Him. You may find yourself offering His water to others.

Question:

Jesus' promise of living water offers a unique refreshment in our daily living. What about believing in Jesus is so refreshing?

Thoughts:

Prayer:

Lord, you say to all, "If you are thirsty, come to My waters..." (Isaiah 55:1). I want to drink from the well of Your salvation...

Psalm 63:1

O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

Eat the Bread of eternal Life

John 6:35-38

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me."

The 6th chapter in John's gospel is one of the longest in the Bible. It begins with Jesus unleashing a powerful, supernatural sign.

Thousands were following him in and around the northern and western shores of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus headed up a large hillside, creating a bit of separation from the crowds, that he might have a few more private moments with his inner ministry team. Still, large numbers drew near, waiting for this remarkable rabbi to continue his stunning healing ministry.

The Lord had something else in mind, however, when he began pressing Philip about the matter of feeding the crowd. Philip demurred. "Large wages couldn't meet this need!" he protested. But the team was listening in, and Andrew did what he seemed to do best. In faith, he brought someone to Jesus (cf. John 1:40-41). A boy with a sack lunch, no doubt packed by a mom who thought ahead. Five barley loaves. Two fish. Coming to dinner: 5,000 plus. And, plenty hungry.

Within just a few minutes, deploying his disciples as caterers, Jesus had multiplied the meager supply into a feast. Thousands ate "as much as they wanted" (6:11), with left-overs to boot. Amazed again, the people concluded "This is THE Prophet (cf. Deut.18:18) who was promised."

But Jesus had a more important message to deliver. "You work hard for food that perishes. You need food which endures to eternal life" (6:27). "Believe this," he continued. "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will not hunger; he who believes in me will not thirst" (6:35).

Come to Jesus. He is the bread of eternal life. The Father wants to give you to Him (6:39). So, believe in Him. Eat. Drink. Live.

Question:

Some struggle with the exclusive claims of Jesus, that He alone is the water we must drink, the bread we must eat. Do I believe Jesus' claims? How could I help others see and experience what Jesus offers?

Thoughts:

Prayer:

Lord, you claim to be the bread which, when eaten, gives never ending life...

John 6:50-51

I am the living bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that comes down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread, he will live forever.

Follow the Light of the world

John 8:12 and 9:4-5

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying,

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

“We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.”

Born a healthy child in Tuscumbia, Alabama on June 27, 1880, Helen Adams Keller at 19 months suddenly became deaf and blind from an unknown illness. Unprepared to raise such a child, her parents soon saw Helen become wild and unruly. But her life changed on March 3, 1887 when Anne Sullivan became her teacher. Sullivan herself, just 14 years older, suffered serious vision problems. Still, her approach with her tandrum-driven student was discipline without crushing, a persisting in obedience and love. Keller began a remarkable development curve, becoming in time a world-wide ambassador for the blind.

Arguably her most famous quote: “The only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision.” She also said, “There is no better way to thank God for your sight than by giving a helping hand to someone in the dark.”

God the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, came to bring sight to the blind, and shine light into the darkest of places. After extending grace to a woman caught in adultery, he openly declared as the sun shone into Jerusalem’s temple that he was “the light of the world.” Just before healing a man born blind (John 9:7), Jesus wanted his disciples to get his purpose. “I am the light this dark world needs” (my paraphrase).

Though too many love “darkness rather than the light” (John 3:19), Jesus unapologetically offers Himself as the light for each person’s life. Receiving his gift means saying to Him, “I believe you are the light of the world, and I will follow you.” Before night finally comes, when the opportunity to step by faith into the light concludes, take that step! This is yet another way to understand what it means to be saved. Receiving Christ means being saved from the kingdom of darkness, and transferred into the kingdom of God’s beloved Son (Colossians 1:13).

Question:

What kind of light does the Lord Jesus bring into my life? How would I describe it? How have I benefitted from it?

Thoughts:

Prayer:

Light of the world, what blind spots do I have? Am I selfishly perpetuating any blindness in my outlook hindering my walk with you?

Colossians 1:13

He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.

Believe God’s Promise (1)

Romans 4:2-5

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.

Abraham is rightly called the “father of faith.” But why? Because his relationship with God, worked out over decades of ancient nomadic life, so clearly illustrates how anyone can not only believe in the Lord, but become the Lord God’s friend. The Almighty delighted in Abraham because over the arc of his life, he routinely trusted God’s promises against the odds.

Paul speaks of Abraham to the Christians in ancient Rome. A church consisting both of believing Jews, still often bound to Old Testament law-keeping, and also believing Gentiles, with little-to-no orientation to Jewish law.

First century Jewish Christians had the most difficult time accepting that one could be saved, and receive the gift of righteousness, *without obeying the Law*. Why wouldn’t “righteousness” be gained by obeying the Law’s demand to be circumcised? To eat only clean foods, to engage in ceremonial purification? Should we not be required to DO something to become more righteous? Meanwhile, the Gentile Christians simply scratched their heads, feeling condemned by their fellow Christians.

Paul’s point – with Abraham in mind – was profoundly on point. Even the father of the Jewish nation was NOT declared righteous by circumcision or law keeping. Rather, Scripture says (cf. Genesis 15:6) that Abraham had righteousness counted (or credited) to him when he BELIEVED God’s promise. Righteousness was given *before* Abram was circumcised. Righteousness given, not through any work done, but merely by faith.

Receiving then the Savior’s gift of forgiveness, of life and light, of righteousness happens when you believe God’s promise. A gift by grace *through* faith.

Question:

So many struggle yet today with the idea that something so incredible – God’s righteousness – would be given so freely, rather than being earned. Why does the outlook of needing to earn God’s favor persist?

Thoughts:

Prayer:

You are a God of grace, who delights in trusting faith...

Titus 3:5

He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy.

Believe God’s Promise (2)

Romans 4:20-25

No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness.” But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

When reflecting on Abraham, we likely muse over the fact that he was called upon by God to believe what seemed to be impossible outcomes. Writing on Abraham’s life, F.B. Meyer notes “God’s commands (to Abraham and to us) are not always accompanied by reasons, but always by promises, expressed or understood” (*Patriarchs of the Faith*, p.14). So often in this patriarch’s life, Abraham had to decide on these kinds of questions: Are God’s promises good or are they not? Will the Almighty do what He said, or has He forgotten to fulfill? Here’s a list of God’s promises to Abram.

- “Leave all you know, and go to a land I will show you.” (Genesis 12:1)
- “I will make you a great nation.” (12:2)
- “I will bless your name and bless you” (12:2-3)
- “I will give you a very great reward.” (15:1).
- “I will give you an heir from your own body.” (15:4)
- “I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars.” (15:5)
- “I will make you and your descendants possess this land.” (15:7)
- “I will make you the father of a multitude of nations.” (17:5)
- “I will give you an heir through (barren) Sarah.” (17:16, 18:10)
- “I will cause your sacrificed son to live.” (22:11-12, cf. Heb. 11:17-19)

Paul observes that “No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God” (Rom 4:20). Divine promises were fulfilled, though frequently Abraham was called to wait for years, even for decades, on God’s timing. Please note it was his faith which was *counted to him as righteousness*.

To receive our Savior’s gift of salvation, forgiveness, eternal life, we too must “believe in Him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord.” Choosing to believe in His promises — fulfilled in a risen Jesus — is to receive His gift.

Question:

God's promises are sure, though many of them require waiting and trusting over time. Trust can waver unless we experience encouragement to persevere. What can I learn from Abraham?

Thoughts:

Prayer:

Your Spirit inside, Lord, is a guarantee of Your promises...

2 Corinthians 1:20

For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.

Hearing the Truth, Believe in Him

Ephesians 1:13-14

In Him (i.e., Christ) you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in Him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of His glory.

Harold Myra and Marshall Shelley relate an interesting fact about the habit of the Rev. Billy Graham (1918-2018). During media interviews, when a microphone check preceded going “live,” Mr. Graham would always quote *John 3:16* – “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.”

“When I asked Mr. Graham why he does that,” remembers Larry Ross, Graham’s media and public relations coordinator, “he replied, ‘Because that way, if I am not able to communicate the gospel clearly during the interview, at least the camera operator will have heard it.’” Ross added that you could ask Graham how he gets his suits dry-cleaned on the road, and he’d turn it into a gospel witness.

The gospel is the most important good news in the world. It deserves being repeated during microphone checks, printed in newspapers, broadcast on radio and television, shared on social media, tweeted around the world. Even offered when explaining suits that need dry-cleaning.

Paul reminds those in the first century church at Ephesus that they had the opportunity to hear “the word of truth, the gospel of (their) salvation.” A message about what God the Father had accomplished through God the Son in the power of God the Holy Spirit to rescue people out of the penalty, out of the power, and eventually (in coming glory) out of the presence of sin. The good news of our salvation. The word of truth.

But the good news of the gospel is not merely a sharing of information. We are not merely to hear it and then blithely move on. No, it is an offer from God to be saved *through responding* to the gospel.

So...when can salvation happen for any person hearing the word of truth about Jesus, the good news? It is when someone responds to the gospel by believing it to be true for him, true for her. A response of faith that what Jesus did changes *my* life. To believe the gospel applies to *me*. This faith leashes the benefits of salvation immediately into my life. All of salvation’s benefits are catalogued in Ephesians 1:3-14. Look well to what salvation brings. Then, take a step beyond hearing. Believe it!

Question:

It is often the case that people have heard the gospel, but never taken the personal faith step of trusting it to be “true for me.” Can you say with confidence you’ve taken that faith step? Explain...

Thoughts:

Prayer:

Holy Spirit, your presence in me is a seal of God’s salvation...

Acts 28:28

Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Apostle Paul)

Receive the Word, Turn to God

1 Thessalonians 1:4-5, 9-10

For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.

For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

It was not easy for those in the city of Thessalonica, the “proud capital of the Roman province of Macedonia” (cf. ESV Study Bible note, “1 Thessalonians”), to receive and believe the gospel. Acts 17 details Paul’s approach in this city of 100,000 strong. Locating a Jewish synagogue (i.e., a regular Sabbath collection of Jews with at least 10 elders), Paul joined in the Old Testament readings and was given opportunity to “explain and prove that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and rise from the dead” (Acts 17:3). His presentation landed on the Savior. “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ” (17:3b).

The faith response was encouraging! “A great many of the devout Greeks, and not a few of the leading women” were persuaded by the presentation and the Holy Spirit, becoming believers in and followers of Jesus the Messiah (i.e., the Christ).

But then difficulty erupted. Jealous Jews employed a group of “wicked men of the rabble, formed a mob, and attacked the household of Jason” (i.e., new believers). Jason himself was dragged before the city’s authorities, accusations flying that he was hosting those “who were turning the world upside down...saying there is another king named Jesus” (Acts 17:5-7). The disturbed authorities levied fines. Jason was released.

Later, Paul writes to them, praising God’s work in them and their courage. “You took in the gospel under the Spirit’s power with full conviction. You turned from idols to serve the living God.” Receiving the Savior means firmly believing the good news even when the enemy counter-attacks.

Question:

Was there any price-tag attached to my experience of believing in Christ? Did I experience (or am I experiencing) the enemy's counter-attack on my faith in Christ, or my following of Him?

Thoughts:

Prayer:

Holy Spirit, who needs my encouragement to stay strong...

1 Thessalonians 1:6

And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers...

Do you have the Son?

1 John 5:9-12

If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater, for this is the testimony of God that he has borne concerning his Son. Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne concerning his Son.

And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

One of the most successful American television shows in recent decades has been Dick Wolf's *Law and Order*, with a 20 year run from 1990-2010. Ceaseless syndication of its 456 episodes continues to fuel the popularity of the series. Virtually every episode features a crime committed and discovered (usually a murder on the streets of New York), evidence gathering by detectives and the District Attorney's office, rough-and-rugged interviews of suspects, surprising twists and turns, and an episode-ending court trial. Almost without fail, cases were won or lost based on the credibility and disclosures of key witnesses in the courtroom.

The integrity of justice being served in the USA depends on the consistent enforcement of laws and the correct prosecution of offenders. Success in these endeavors often depends on the trustworthiness of witnesses.

"We receive the testimony of men," John is inspired by God's Spirit to observe. "God's testimony is greater." More trustworthy. More reliable. More believable, with greater standing. Testimony that is faultlessly true.

So what is God's testimony concerning His Son? It is so wonderfully simple. Believe in the Son of God. That is where true life is found, and in Him is where the promise of eternal life can be realized. Anyone can "have" the Son, by believing in Him (in who He was and what He did for us on the cross and through His resurrection). But the converse is also true. Some do not "have" the Son. Why? Because they do not believe in Him; they do not trust that eternal life comes through believing in Him.

Believing in the Son is to have Him. God testifies. So, do you *have* the Son?

Question:

Do I “have” the Son? When did I start believing in Him? When was I sure that, by believing in Him, I have eternal life?

Thoughts:

Prayer:

Father God, your testimony about Your Son is to be believed...

John 10:28

I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. (Jesus)

The Good News Which Saves – Receiving The Savior’s Gift

Journal Summary

Day 15 Receive Him, Believe in His Name – John 1:9-12

Day 16 Believe in Him to have Life – John 3:14-18

Day 17 Take a drink of living water – John 4:13-15

Day 18 Eat the Bread of Life – John 6:35-38

Day 19 Follow the Light – John 8:12 and 9:4-5

Day 20 *Believe in God's Promise (1) – Romans 4:2-5*

Day 21 *Believe in God's Promise (2) – Romans 4:20-25*

Day 22 *Hearing the Truth, Believe in Him – Ephesians 1:13-14*

Day 23 *Receive the Word, Turn to God – 1 Thessalonians 1:4-5,9-10*

Day 24 *Do you have the Son? – I John 5:10-12*

Additional observations and reflections:

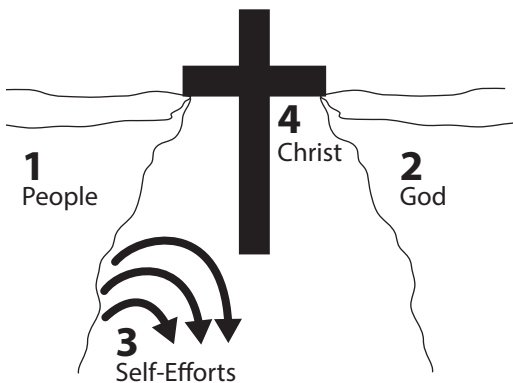
Diagrams

to illustrate receiving
the Savior's gift of salvation

The Bridge

One simple way to illustrate our need for salvation and God's gift found in Christ is The Bridge diagram. Simply drawing this on a napkin or sheet, and verbally stepping through 4 Biblical truths can help clarify how to receive salvation.

1. **People** – we all are separated from God and His life because of our sinfulness (by nature and choice). Romans 3:9-10
2. **God** – God is perfectly holy and just. Our sin and sinning creates a chasm, a broken relationship and distance from knowing God and loving God. Isaiah 53:6, 59:2
3. **Self-efforts** – we all try to earn our way into God's favor and a relationship with God through a variety of good works, which, lacking consistency and perfection, fall short. Romans 3:23
4. **Christ's death for sin** – loving each of us, God provided His own perfect Son to die for the penalty of our sin, and to break the power of sin and death. We can be forgiven and be adopted into a new family relationship with God through believing in Christ. Anyone can "cross the bridge" by simply believing in Christ for forgiveness and new life in God. John 3:16

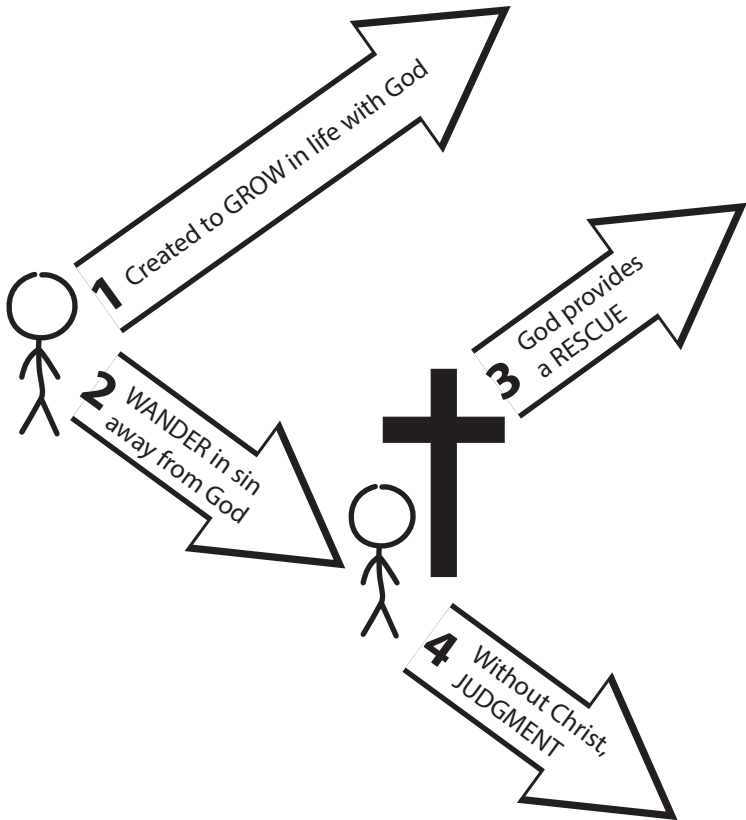


In Him we have redemption through His blood (or death), the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace.

Ephesians 1:7

Four Arrows

1. We are created to GROW in life with God – Genesis 1-2
2. We WANDER in sin away from God – Isaiah 53:6
3. God provides a RESCUE through Christ – Romans 6:23
4. Without Christ, JUDGMENT – John 3:17-18



For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God...

1 Peter 3:18

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in(to) Him, shall not perish, but have everlasting life.

John 3:16

Suggested prayers to receive God's gift of salvation and life in Christ

The following prayers can help express for someone his/her readiness to trust in Christ for forgiveness, salvation, and life. Each one may simply read either prayer to God, to express his/her faith.

DECISION TO "CROSS OVER THE BRIDGE" PRAYER

Father God, thank You for providing a bridge to me. Thank You for sending Your Son into our world. Right now, I choose to believe that He died for my wandering off, my sin, and then rose alive from the grave in victory.

Right now I receive Your forgiveness. Right now I trust in Him alone for my salvation, and for righteousness before You. Right now, in faith I step over the cross-bridge to You.

Thank You for making me Your child. This is a new start for me, and I am eager to grow in Your family as a disciple of Your Son. Amen

Signed _____

Spiritual Birthday _____ / _____ / _____

A SIMPLE DECISION OF FAITH PRAYER

Father God in heaven,

Today I choose to place my faith and trust in Jesus Christ alone.

I believe He died in my place to pay the penalty my sin deserves.

I believe You raised Him from the dead by the Holy Spirit's power.

By faith I receive the gift of His righteousness in place of my sin.

Thank you. Help me to grow as a follower of Christ.

Amen.

Signed _____

Spiritual Birthday _____ / _____ / _____

NOTE: IF YOU HAVE TRUSTED CHRIST FOR SALVATION IN PRAYER...

- Please sign this sheet and note your "birthday."
- Tell a Christian friend about your decision.
- Use this devotional by working through Section 2 "The Difference the Good News Makes" — and share your discoveries with your friend.