

A Note from Founding Senior Pastor Keith Loy

Celebrate,

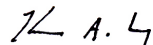
These days are unprecedented, but just as true, we are children of an unprecedented God. This is precisely my hope as we engage in this new series – *The Greatness of God*.

This six-week series is an in-depth walk through Psalm 23. It is my hope that we will grasp a deep understanding of the words of David that have become such a beloved Psalm to so many.

It is my hope that you have covenanted yourself to one of our LIFE Groups as part of this six-week study. The Word of God tells us that “*as iron sharpens iron, a man sharpens another*” (Proverbs 27:17). For us to truly grasp what God has for us, and to get the most out of it, we need to be a part of a circle; to discuss, wrestle through, and grow as His children. It is also my hope that these daily readings will play a vital part in helping you wrestle as well, and just maybe, they will also provide the fuel to aid in your discussions.

May I encourage you to take each day as it has been written. Don't jump ahead or read ahead. Simply digest each one for that day, followed by the questions at the end of each one. I am believing that God is going to help us get a better understanding of just how awesome He is, and by doing so, it will change the very life that we have been blessed with.

Pastor Keith

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "K. A. L." with a stylized flourish at the end.

Week 1

Our knowledge of God affects everything in our lives – our relationship with Him, and His relationship with us. You see, how we perceive Him has a lot to do with how we receive and believe in Him. A lot of people enlist a lot of words to describe who and what God is. Words like merciful, righteous, just, holy, all-powerful, among a few, and every one of them is true. However, the question does not lie within the words we ascribe to Him, but what our life reveals when the going is tough, when our way is rough, about Him. Talk is cheap, isn't it? It has been said that adversity is the revelation of all of us in what we believe.

A.W. Tozer, in his book, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, wrote, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." Tozer understood that such mindfulness, our understanding of God, affects everything we do. "Where it is inadequate or out of plumb the whole structure must sooner or later collapse." The late Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, agreed: "Everything about our lives – our attitudes, motives, desires, actions, and even our words – are influenced by our view of God."

You see, the career we choose, who we will ultimately marry, the friends we make, - what and how we value, are all based on our understanding of what and who God is.

When we read of God's chosen people, the Israelites, we see how a wrong perception gets lived out firsthand. After all the years of living in Egyptian captivity, 400 to be exact, God delivers them. In their journey to a land God had promised (don't miss that), God parts the Red Sea, provides them protection, a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, and all the daily rations necessary, literally raining it from the sky (that alone says a lot). However, when they needed water they cried out to Moses, "*Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?*" (Exodus 17:3).

Time after time, again and again, they failed to trust in God's goodness because of their immediate understanding of Him. Their misconception kept leading them to earthly pursuits rather than embracing their heavenly rewards. "Idolatry of heart assumes that God is other than He is and substitutes for the true God one made after its own likeness," says Tozer.

You see, when we do not view God correctly, we will continue to risk worshipping Him not as He is, but as whom we have created Him to be, and that is never good. We may not get as creative as the Israelites did in the desert, fabricating a cow out of gold; but maybe worse, we quietly build more subtle ones, idols that are not easily detected, but just as lethal in the end.

Listen, God wants us to have a rightful understanding of who He is, and what He does, because it does affect everything in our lives. "*Let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know Me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight*" (Jeremiah 9:24).

Day 1

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What comes to your mind when you think of God?

2. In what ways are you trusting in God for His goodness? If not, are you viewing God correctly, or have you created a “cow out of gold”?

3. What can you do today to ensure your view of God is as it should be to carry you through your day?

God, rid me of false perceptions of You, and help me to see You as You truly are. May I then be a reflection of You. Amen.

Week 1

Allow me to offer some suggestions that I believe will help develop a good, righteous view of who God is. First, choose faith. As the writer of Hebrews states, a “*faith that shows the reality of what we hope for,*” though we cannot see it (Hebrews 11:1).

Arthur Pink, *The Attributes of God*, writes, “God is only truly known in the soul as we yield ourselves to Him.” Just because you may not like what is happening to you does not mean you have to surrender what God is doing in you.

You see, we cannot correctly view God in and of ourselves; we need help. Thus, we must ask the Holy Spirit to help us view God correctly and identify the lies we may have believed up to this point. “We must learn to measure ourselves,” theologian J. I. Packer writes in his book *Knowing God*, “not by our knowledge about God, not by our gifts and responsibilities in the church, but by how we pray and what goes on in our hearts.”

God is not some cosmic killjoy, or a great bully; nor is He some divine Santa Claus or celestial vending machine where we get to pull a lever and out comes what we so desire. So often, we do not recognize that our view of God is out-of-sorts – skewed at best.

Allow me to offer something that can be incredibly helpful. Make a list with three columns. In the first column, write words that come to mind when you think about God. In the second column, give an example of how you reflect these truths in your life. In the third column, match your words to what God says about Himself in His Word.

For example, if you say that God is good, is that only after something good happens, or does that follow the difficult times as well? What verses support that claim?

Now listen, pursuing a true view of God is not the same as understanding why He does or does not do something. God is very clear that His ways are higher than our ways (Isaiah 55:9), and thus, we must fight all temptations to reduce Him to a cause-and-effect kind of God. For God is good all the time, and all the time, God is good, regardless of whether we fully grasp that in each and every moment. For in everything God is teaching us and showing us who He is, not what we make Him to be.

This is precisely why we must always turn to the Word, because His Word provides for us the clearest description of who He is. You see, choosing to hold on to God’s Truth – aligning your thoughts to an accurate view of who God is – does not mean that our circumstances will change, but it does mean that our faith will not.

We all have a choice to align our view of God with truth, or not; and always remember, our choices influence everything.

Day 2

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What are the lies in your life that need to be replaced with God's Truth?

2. How can you change your vantage point, in good times and hard times, to always see the goodness of God?

3. Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to help you identify the lies in your life and replace them with the truth of God's Word.

God, help me in my moments of frustration – when I don't understand Your ways in my circumstances. I know You are good and just. May I cling to the truth of who You are. Amen.

Week 1

The Bible gives us three ways that God has revealed Himself, and these three ways help us understand not only who God is, but how He relates to us – through nature, the Word, and through Jesus, His Son.

In Psalms we read, *“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world”* (Psalm 19:1-4).

In Romans Paul writes, *“Since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – His eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made”* (Romans 1:20).

Just look around. Who God is – what He is like – is all around us. How can we not testify to the goodness of a grand Designer when we step out and explore nature, enjoy the wildlife therein, as well as embrace our own humanity? This is precisely why I believe it would take more faith to believe there is no God than it would to believe that there is one. Creation is a running commentary of who and what God is.

David was awestruck. *“When I look at Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have set in place”* (Psalm 8:3). He went on to write, *“Great are the works of the Lord; they are pondered by all who delight in them”* (Psalm 11:2).

Jesus told His disciples, *“Consider how the wildflowers grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these”* (Luke 12:27).

The very flowers smile under God’s goodness. The sun, the moon, the stars, day after day, night after night, do the same. Their revelations, boasting not in words, but in their silence, testifying, openly, loudly, their praise of God’s amazing goodness. It is a kaleidoscope of beauty, of color, radiant, all around us, cascading in chorus of the greatness, the goodness of their Creator, asking us to join in, sharing the same, that God is good, all the time.

Dutch theologian and writer Henri Nouwen inspires us to take up our calling as stewards of God’s creation, and to appreciate all that God created surrounding us. He writes, *“When we think of oceans and mountains, forests and deserts, trees, plants and animals, the sun, the moon, the stars, and all the galaxies, as God’s creation, waiting eagerly to be “brought into the same glorious freedom as the children of God”* (Roman 8:21), we can only stand in awe of God’s majesty and God’s all-embracing plan of salvation. It is not just we, human beings, who wait for salvation in the midst of our suffering; all of creation groans and moans with us longing to reach its full freedom.”

Day 3

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. When was the last time you took time to admire God's creation? What did you notice?

2. Write down some words that express the glory of God.

3. How can you represent God's glory to others today?

*Father, oh how I can zip through my day and forget to see what is all around me – Your majestic creation! Help me to pause and be filled with complete awe of You.
Thank You for helping me to see nature through Your eyes. Amen.*

Week 1

There is an old story about a Chinese man who lived on the border of China and Mongolia. In those days, there was constant conflict along the border. The Chinese man had a beautiful horse, but one day the horse leaped over the fence and ran across the border, and was captured by the Mongolians. His friends tried to comfort him. “That’s bad,” they said. “What makes you think it’s bad?” asked the Chinese man. “Maybe it’s good.”

A few days later, the horse came back into his farm, bringing with it a beautiful snow-white stallion. His friends crowded around. “That’s good,” they said. The old man replied, “What makes you think it’s good? Maybe it’s bad.”

Later that week, his son was riding that snow-white stallion when he was thrown off and he broke his leg. The neighbors again gathered around. “That’s bad,” they cried. “What makes you think it’s bad?” asked the Chinese man. “Maybe it’s good.”

The next week, war broke out with Mongolia, and a Chinese army general came through town drafting all the young men for the war, except for the young man who had a broken leg. The Chinese man said to his friends, “You see, the things you thought were bad turned out good; and the things you thought were good turned out bad.”

Life can be circumstantial, but God cannot be understood from the circumstances. Too often, that is precisely what we do. We tend to define God according to how the circumstances turn out. You and I cannot control what happens in life any more than we can control the wind blowing, and where. But we most certainly can control how we respond in those circumstances – and that response should be faith in who God is, not what we want Him to be when things are not going the way we had hoped. He is the way, and God is good because His character is such, regardless of life’s circumstances.

Listen to the words of Tozer – “Divine goodness is self-caused, infinite, perfect, and eternal. Since God is immutable (meaning unchangeable), He never varies in the intensity of His loving-kindness. He has never been kinder than He now is, nor will He ever be less kind. He is no respecter of persons but makes His sun to shine on the evil as well as on the good, and sends His rain on the just and on the unjust. The cause of His goodness is in Himself, the recipients of His goodness are all His beneficiaries without merit and without recompense.”

Now, imagine God thinking of us this way, which He does. Like a loving father toward His beloved child, which we are. And it is not just some of the time, but all of the time. We are the object of His affection, and there is no change to that, in that, forever.

You see, if we truly understood this, it would change so much of our lives in how we live, love, and learn. The problem is that we drift from God because we have not gotten a right view of God. We need a fresh revelation of Him. We need to see that He is good, and that in the midst of whatever we face, we never face anything alone.

Day 4

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. We all have been in a situation where the outcome was not what we had wanted.
How did you respond?

2. How did you view God?

3. Do you need to change your view of God? How can you do that today?

God, as Your Word says, and as I read here today, we never face anything alone. You are always with us. You laugh with us, and You cry with us. Help me to trust in Your ways in all circumstances, knowing the peace of Your presence. Amen.

Week 1

Everything changes, doesn't it? The events of this past year alone prove that.

Consider for a moment some of the most significant changes throughout history. In 1915 the Victor Talking Machine Co. introduced the phonograph. By 1919, Americans had spent more on phonographs than musical instruments, books, periodicals, and sporting goods combined. In 1916 electric clocks were introduced, and the average price of a new car was \$600 (my, have things changed). And even though our means of travel was changing rapidly, still by 1930, only one out of five Americans could afford an automobile. In 1927, the first successful demonstration of the television took place in New York City, but you couldn't actually buy one until the end of WWII – which meant after 1945. By 1950, 9% of homes owned one, but by 1979, it would rise to 98%. Poet Malcolm Cowley was so right: “The world is a scene of change.”

By the way, I think this is what made *Star Trek* so incredibly popular. Who would have thought back then that so much of what seemed fantasy would become reality? In fact, there are only two things still today that have not come into existence. We still cannot beam people up, and there's still no intelligent life down here (now that's funny).

But here's the deal: in a world of change, isn't it great to know that we have a God who does not? In Malachi we read, “*I the Lord do not change*” (Malachi 3:6). In Hebrews it states that God is “*the same yesterday, today, and forever*” (Hebrews 13:8). And King David wrote, “*You are always the same*” (Psalm 102:27). This is great news, but is it the news you have used?

What are you building your life on? A God that does not change, or a world that never stays the same?

Today's heroes are tomorrow's zeros. One day your picture appears on the cover of *Fame and Fortune* and the very next, it's in the tabloids of pain and failure.

You see, the enemy's two favorite days are yesterday and tomorrow – because he knows how quickly everything can change. And yet so many people live there – either reminiscing about all the days gone by, trying to get back those moments of what once was, or spending every present moment speaking into ‘one-of-these’ days. James wrote, “*Don't boast about tomorrow. You do not even know what will happen tomorrow*” (James 4:14).

Listen, God's favorite day is today, right now, because today is really all we have. I'm not against making plans for the future, or enjoying a moment down memory lane; we all need to do both. What I'm talking about is making that your lifestyle.

So, for the next few days, we're going to talk about this God that we can count on in every moment of every day. A God we can build our lives on, Who will never disappoint.

Day 5

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What have you based your life on?

2. Do you reflect on yesterday or plan for tomorrow?

3. Since God never changes, how do you need to change to live today as God intended?

*God, I am grateful that You never change. Navigating the world's changes can be scary, but I know I can depend on You in all circumstances.
Thank You for always being there. Amen.*

Week 1

In an ever-changing world, as I stated yesterday, it is good to know that our God does not. It is good to know that there is a Rock that does not move, regardless of changing sands surrounding our lives.

Allow me to give you two things, when it comes to God, that we can always count on.

The first is God's love. The Bible tells us, *"I have loved you with an everlasting love"* (Jeremiah 31:3).

My friends, we are the object of God's love, and this love is not only something we can count on, but it is continuous. Paul tells us that *"nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God"* (Romans 8:38). We will never hear someone say, "What is with God today? Who rained on His parade? Who put the wedgie into His shorts?"

We can go to bed tonight, regardless of how our day went, and wake-up tomorrow completely oblivious of what the day will bring, and still know that He is the same God with the same love for us, and still with us.

You see, one of the reasons we struggle as humans, and exchange frustrations with one another, is because we are always changing. Ever heard someone say, "He is not the man I married" or "What happened to my sweet little child?"

The fact is, there are days that I just do not feel like being all that loving. Am I alone here? My guess is that we have all felt that way. But with God, those days never exist. He never has a bad day. He is never moody, muddy, or miffed with us. We can always count on His love.

But second, when it comes to God, we can count on His Word. The Bible says, *"The grass withers, and the flowers fall away. But the Word of the Lord will last forever"* (1 Peter 1:24-25).

I love it. The Bible is always fresh, it is always relevant, and it always works. It's crazy—no other book has taken more criticism, ridicule, and condemnation than the Bible, and yet, throughout time, it has never changed. It still works, regardless of the culture it is in. In Matthew we read, *"Heaven and earth will pass away, but My Words will never pass away"* (Matthew 24:35). David wrote, *"Long ago I learned from Your statutes that You established them to last forever"* (Psalm 119:152).

Alan Shepard, the very first American astronaut, was asked by a reporter just before he got into his spaceship, "What is the one thing you are depending on most in this space venture?" His answer was classic, "I am depending on the fact that God's laws never change."

Jesus told us, *"Everyone who hears these words of Mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock"* (Matthew 5:24).

Day 6

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Where is your focus today?

2. How do you need to change your focus so today is a fresh new day?

3. What words from God's Word can you put into practice today?

*Father, Thank You so much for Your incredible love and Your unchanging Word.
Today, please use both of those things to change me into the person
You want me to be. Amen.*

Week 1

God's goodness is taught and implied in every book of the Bible.

The prophet Jeremiah writes, *"This is what the LORD says: 'When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill My gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart. I will be found by you,' declares the LORD, 'and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,' declares the LORD, 'and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile'"* (Jeremiah 29:10-14).

Talk about a promise. Talk about God's goodness.

Paul was right: *"When God is for you, no one can be against you"* (Romans 8:31), because there is nothing greater or more powerful than God. This is not a promise of the absence of opposition. Rather, it is a promise regarding the impotence of the opposition. God will vanquish any enemies that present themselves before believers.

I read about a classroom at Hannibal-LaGrange College in Missouri. It was the day for final exams. Denise Banderman walked into the classroom minutes before the professor arrived. Everybody in the room was doing last-minute cramming, as you could imagine. Then the professor entered and took a few minutes to review. Most of it was familiar, but there were some things that no one remembered, let alone, ever hearing. The professor then stated, "This is in your textbook, and you are responsible for the contents of it on this exam," sending chills up every student's spine.

The time came for the test. He gave the word and every student took up their pen and turned over their test. Listen to the response in Denise Banderman's own words. "I could not believe it. To my astonishment, every answer on the test was filled in. My name, too, was even written on the exam in red ink."

A wordless stir traveled like a wave over the class as each student looked at their completed exam. On the bottom of the last page of every test was a note from the professor himself – "All the answers on your test are correct. You will receive an A on the final exam. The reason you passed the test is because the creator of the test took it for you. All the work you did in preparation for this test did not help you get the A."

I love this story because it is the story of God's Word, of God's grace, God's Bible story. Over and over, truth after truth, you can read of the revelation of God's goodness. So good that He would send His only Son, Jesus, to take the test on our behalf (John 3:16). Paul tells us that there is nothing we can do to earn it, but only receive it (Ephesians 2:8-9).

I can tell you this, life is good when you understand that God is good. *"How great is Your goodness, which You have stored up for those who fear You"* (Psalm 31:19).

Day 7

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Write down a time when you experienced God's goodness.

2. How long ago was the experience that you wrote?

3. God is good all the time. What do you need to do to recognize God's goodness today?

*Lord, help me to be reminded of how good You are today,
and to worship You for it all throughout my day. Amen.*

Week 2

Chip Ingram tells a story about a young woman he once met who had just been through a messy divorce. You see, the husband had left her for another woman. It was not only a sad situation, but a bad one as well, and Chip was not sure if he could offer her much comfort.

As she talked about her future, however, she displayed a sense of calm that caught him by surprise. She had not been a Christian very long, and she did not have a significant amount of Bible knowledge. Her life, in fact, had been marked by repeated experiences of extreme pain and disappointment. But when he asked her about her situation, she answered in an unexpected way. “I know life may be hard,” she said, “but things will be great for my children and for me. I do not understand it all, but I know what God is like. I know He would never do anything to hurt me, and I know He has a great plan for us.”

As you ponder her words, listen to what Chip Ingram said in response – “It wasn’t so much the words she said – although they were profound – but the sense of confidence that flowed with her statement. It was almost as if she had just walked out of an adjoining room where she had enjoyed a personal conversation with God, who had assured her that all was well. She was convinced that her future looked bright even though her present was filled with pain and questions. She knew something more real than her immediate suffering. This young woman’s biblical knowledge may have been limited, but what she knew was pure gold. She understood with all her heart that God is good. She is like a beautiful tree standing in the midst of a harsh, desert landscape. Everything around her looks ruined, yet she thrives. She is so alive that she looks out of place. She is filled with life because her roots tap into an underground river – the goodness of God.”

It has been said that “the sharpness of a sword comes from grinding, and the fragrance of plum blossoms comes from the bitter cold.” You see, only by being tempered often can iron be turned into quality steel. Thus, if we want to experience genuine growth, it is imperative that we understand that our loving Father will sometimes place us on the anvils of life to assure that our faith is fortified and sure.

The writer of Hebrews tells us, “*God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in His holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it*” (Hebrews 12:11).

I read a story about a very skilled physician who was about to perform a delicate operation upon the ear of one of his patients. “I may hurt you,” he calmly said, “but I will not injure you.” Oh, if we just understood this, and believed that there is a Great Physician – God – who is faithful even more!

“Don’t make light of the Lord’s discipline, and don’t lose heart when He corrects you. For the Lord disciplines those He loves” (Hebrews 12:5-6).

This is precisely why we can hold to Paul’s words to “*give thanks to God in all circumstances; for this is His will for us in Christ Jesus*” (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

Day 8

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Does the story of the young woman, of her resilience in the storm because of her trust in God's plan for her life, ring true for you?

2. If not, what is preventing you from fully trusting God and His goodness in every circumstance?

3. If her story does resonate with you, who will you inspire and encourage today to trust God in all things and in all situations?

Almighty God, if storms rise up in my life today, I will praise You in the midst of them. If they rise up in someone else's life, please help me to point them to You. Amen.

Week 2

There is a story about a young lawyer who was called in from the big city to represent a large railroad company that was being sued by a farmer. It seems that the farmer's prize cow was missing from a field through which the railroad passed, and the farmer was suing for the value of the cow.

Before the case went to trial, the young lawyer cornered the farmer and convinced him to settle out of court for half of what he originally wanted. The farmer signed the necessary papers and graciously accepted the check. The young lawyer then could not resist gloating about his big success.

He said to the farmer, "You know, I could not have won this case if it had gone to trial. The engineer was sound asleep, and the foreman was in the caboose when the train passed through your farm that morning. I didn't have a single witness to put on the stand."

With a wry smile, the old farmer replied, "Well, to tell you the truth, young feller, I was a little worried about winning that case myself, because my prize cow came home this morning." We worry about a lot of things, don't we? And may I add, a lot of things worry us unnecessarily.

The bottom line is this: Worry has much to do with a poor perception of who God is and what He is like.

Look at these words from Matthew's gospel. *"I tell you not to worry about everyday life – whether you have enough food and drink, or enough clothes to wear. Isn't life more than food, and your body more than clothing? Look at the birds. They don't plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds them. And aren't you far more valuable to Him than they are?"* (Matthew 6:25-26).

He goes on to say, *"Why worry about your clothing? Look at the lilies of the field and how they grow. They don't work or make their clothing, yet Solomon in all his glory was not dressed as beautifully as they are. And if God cares so wonderfully for wildflowers that are here today and thrown into the fire tomorrow, (now watch this) He will certainly care for you. Why do you have so little faith?"* (Matthew 6:28-30).

Faith is fundamental in the Christian faith. Faith speaks volumes about Whom you trust, and Whom you depend upon. *"Your heavenly Father already knows all your needs"* (Matthew 6:32).

Theologian Matthew Henry says it this way, "As He (God) is good to all, so He does good – He is good to all His creatures, from the highest angel to the meanest worm, to all but devils and damned sinners, that have shut themselves out from His goodness. All His creatures receive the fruit of His merciful care and bounty."

Do you really believe that God will take care of you?

Day 9

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Do you have any worries today? What are they?

2. Are you able to release your worries to God? If not, read Matthew 6:28-30, 32 again. Release your worries and trust God to meet your needs today.

3. If you have surrendered your worries, who can you encourage today by telling your story of trust?

Heavenly Father, help me to have more faith in You than I do in my problems. Amen.

Week 2

An eagle's growth can be quite cruel. Consider for a moment a young eaglet. For it to learn to hover, the mother will literally push it over a cliff's edge, once its feathers are full and developed. While it is falling, the eaglet will exhaust every amount of strength just to survive. Though painful, as well as tiring, the eaglet will do just that –fly.

However, in teaching it to soar, the mother eagle will break its wings and again, pushing it over the cliff. This time, the eaglet will suffer more unbearable pain than it did prior. Yet, no matter how painful, it will flap its broken wings, or die. The result is that this majestic bird will be able to not only hover, but soar high in the blue skies.

Likewise, I believe we will experience much of the same as a young eaglet does. You see, difficulties are exactly what God meticulously arranges for the training and maturing of our faith.

The first time I read the above saga of a baby eaglet, I could not read the prophet Isaiah's words the same – *“For those who wait on the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint”* (Isaiah 40:31).

You see, too often we do not see the value of adversities, let alone see them as stepping-stones to our Spiritual development. Thus, we tend to close off our hearts, or even more destructive, callous them, fearing the inevitable. For we want peace, ease, comfort; not difficulty, hardship, or calamity.

Now listen, this is foolish thinking, not the mindset God wants us to have. James tells us, *“For we know that when our faith is tested, our endurance has a chance to grow”* (James 1:3).

Paul writes, *“We continue to shout our praise, even when we're hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we're never left feeling shortchanged”* (Romans 5:4).

Seventeenth century cleric/writer Charles Caleb Colton once stated, “Times of great calamity and confusion have ever been productive of the greatest minds. The purest ore is produced from the hottest furnace, and the brightest thunderbolt comes from the darkest storm.”

So, the next time you feel like you are hanging from one of life's cliff edges, maybe it is time for you to let go. For just maybe you, too, can fly.

Day 10

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What adversity are you facing today?

2. What steps will you take to ensure your mindset is on God and His love for you?

3. How can you show others the goodness of God in the midst of your troubles?

God, Thank you for using the difficult times in my life to create something beautiful. Help me to trust You in the process. Amen.

Week 2

Charles Swindoll tells a story of how he and his wife were at Dallas Theological Seminary back in 1959. It was a hot summer day and they needed an air conditioner. Since they did not have one in the little apartment they were living in, Charles said to his wife, “I will tell you what we need to do. Let us not tell anybody about our need; let us just pray about it.” They were determined to trust God, and made an agreement that they would not say anything to anybody about their need.

Winter passed. Spring came. And the two just kept on praying about it. Charles said they went for a quick visit to Houston to visit his wife’s family. While they were there, out of the clear blue, a phone call came from a guy who lived across town who had known them years before. He simply said, “Chuck, we have an air conditioner. It is almost new. Could you use it?”

Of course, Charles said, “No,” right? Just kidding.

Of course, he said yes, but my point in sharing this story is that this is how God works. For what seems impossible to us, well, with God, *“all things are possible to those who believe”* (Matthew 9:23).

So, there it is. When it comes to God, what do you believe, then, about who He is and how He works?

Listen to the words of Jesus: *“If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in Heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him?”* (Matthew 7:11).

David agrees, *“For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor; no good thing does He withhold from those whose walk is blameless”* (Psalm 84:11).

Now listen, sometimes we ask for something that we think is good, but God may not see it that way. Have you ever experienced this?

You see, God always knows better. Or as Ruth Graham once pointed out, if God answered every prayer, she would have been married to the wrong man several times. You see, Ruth understood that even though she might have thought something was good, was right, God had something different in mind. For He had someone who was so much better than she could have ever imagined.

Like James, when you pray, believe – for you will receive. However, do not be surprised if what you receive is so much better than you ever could have imagined in the first place.

I like the way William McDonald says it, “Providence is grounds for thankfulness.”

Day 11

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What are you praying for?

2. Do you believe God will provide?

3. Will you recognize the blessing of God's provision when the answer to your prayer is not as expected?

*God, I believe that You will provide for me.
Thank You in advance, for however You answer my prayers. Amen.*

Week 2

How many of you say grace before mealtime?

In our house, it is a fundamental expectation (unless eating at a Brazilian grill, where we pray after our meal for forgiveness). But other than that, it was something I was raised in, and something with which I want our children to be raised.

We do not have a set formula, allowing whoever is praying, to pray from their heart. Sometimes it can be long-winded prayer, which tends to frustrate me, especially if I just removed the steaks from the grill. Other times, it can be quick, to the point, so we can get about the business by which we gathered in the first place.

Now, this is somewhat different from when I was a child.

Our prayers went along the lines of “Good bread, good meat, good Lord, let’s eat,” or, “Thank You, Lord, for this meal, we know You are the giver. But thank You, Lord, most of all, that we’re not eating liver.”

I know, not real spiritual, but it served its purpose, right? I mean, granted, I am still here.

But the most common one was, “God is great, God is good, and we thank Him for this food. By His hands, we all are fed, thank You Lord, for daily bread.”

My guess is, this one sounds a little more familiar. It too was short and sweet, so we could now eat (hmmm, I think I just wrote another).

But read it again. Short. Simple. And GREAT theology. Think about it. God is great. God is good. It’s precisely what His Word tells us, but how many of us believe it? You know, when the going gets rough. When, just maybe, the meal is not what we had hoped, are we still thanking Him? Are we still praising Him?

I can only wonder how often are our prayers going through the motions, without even considering the One being mentioned?

Sure, when we get done praying, the potatoes are still warm, the corn gets passed, and the bread gets buttered. But what about the prayer in the first place? Are we remembering the One to Whom we are praying?

It might seem easy to instinctively answer, “yes,” but of course, that is what we are supposed to say. But I am talking about what God knows, down deep, inside our hearts. Do we really believe He is a good God?

“Taste and see (and here it comes) that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8).

Day 12

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How would you rate your prayer time - going through the motions or conversational with God?

2. How frequently do you thank God for the simple things - those things that are taken for granted?

3. Take time now to thank God for the day that is before you and all that comes with it.

Father God, thank You for hearing my prayers; forgive me for the times my prayers have been insincere. Teach me to pray from my heart. Amen.

Week 2

Jeff Walling, of Youth Leaders Initiative, compares our need for God's mercy to that of a thoughtless husband.

So, imagine with me. You are at a mall with some friends, engrossed in looking at sporting goods, or whatever interests you, that you completely forgot about the time.

Suddenly, you remember. You were supposed to pick your wife up at 2:30pm from the beauty parlor, and it is already after 4:00pm. With a cry of, "Oh, no!" you pull out your cell phone to call the beauty parlor and ask for your wife. They tell you that she already left some time ago. You think to yourself, "I'm dead."

Your friends ask, "Is something wrong?" Without hesitation, and the perspiration already rolling down your forehead, you answer, "I was supposed to pick up my wife an hour and a half ago from the beauty parlor. My in-laws are coming over tonight, and this was going to be a very special evening. And I completely forgot to pick her up." It only takes one of them to clarify your reality, "Man, you're dead."

You quickly call home and your son answers. "Son, is your mom there?" Your son answers, "Dad. You're dead. Whatever you did, don't come home. She's here. Dad, she had to walk home. Have you looked outside? Dad, it's raining. I think it started about five minutes after she started walking home."

"What does she look like?" you ask.

"Well, Dad, you've seen our dog when it comes in from the rain. She looks something like that. I love you, Dad. It's been good knowing you."

You know you are in a world of trouble, but you head for home anyway. As you pull in the drive, you see your in-laws coming down the street. You think, "I've got to beat them inside to make this thing right." You open the door and try to assume your most humble expression. You droop your shoulders, but there stands your wife with a soup spoon in one hand and a knife in the other. She has homicide in her eyes and speaks, "You promised 2:30pm. I walked over a mile in these high heels to get home, and it rained the whole way. WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?"

You think, "What can I say? 'I hit my head at the mall and got amnesia? A terrorist grabbed me and held me hostage for the last few hours?' No, that won't do. I've got to tell her the truth. 'Baby. Honey doll. I'm so sorry. I am a complete idiot. I have no excuse. I just forgot.'" You close your eyes expecting to open them before the pearly gates of Heaven. She responds, "I know you forgot, but it's okay. Just give me a kiss and let us forget it."

Now, guys, what kind of kiss would you give your wife? A little peck, or tongue in cheek (no pun intended)? I am confident you'd grab her like no other and say, "Honey, you are the greatest wife in the world. I love you. Thank you for being so forgiving and understanding."

Now, with all that being said, when you come to church on Sunday morning, and hear about the goodness and mercy of God, do you give Him a peck on the cheek, or do you embrace Him and say, "I love you. Thank you for being so forgiving and understanding?"

Day 13

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Has someone come to you asking for forgiveness?

2. How did you handle it?

3. What have you done in your life where you needed forgiveness that seemed unattainable?

*Father God, thank You for Your love; I know I can be thoughtless at times.
Please help me learn to forgive others the way You forgive me. Amen.*

Week 2

A well-known actor had come to town, and to the delight of everyone, was giving public recitations of some of life's outstanding literary works. Among them was the 23rd Psalm.

His presentation was flawless. Everyone was impressed.

However, at the performance as well was an old saint of God, known to recite the 23rd Psalm too. Upon some friendly prodding, as well as the consent of the actor, he finally gave in to presenting his version.

As all eyes were fixed upon him, with deep feeling and emotion, he began – “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside still waters...” On and on, he continued, emphasizing each personal pronoun as his very own until he finished. As he sat down, everyone was visibly moved, including the actor. Without any hesitation, the actor stood up and exclaimed, “I know the Psalm, but this man knows the Shepherd.”

My question is, do we, really?

I fear we do not. Maybe in ritual, but I can only ponder as in relational.

You see, our actions will always speak louder than our words, and nothing will bring our actions to the forefront more than adversity.

Listen to what Paul wrote, “*I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted, until that day*” (2 Timothy 1:12). This is also why he wrote to the church in Philippi, “*I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want*” (Philippians 4:12). And then concluded with, “*I can do everything through Him who gives me strength*” (Philippians 4:13).

Some of you might be familiar with the old hymn – *Trust and Obey*.

The inspiration for the hymn began in 1886 when the composer of the music, Daniel B. Towner, was the music conductor during one of Dwight L. Moody's renowned revivals. “Mr. Moody was conducting a series of meetings in Brockton, Massachusetts, and I had the pleasure of singing for him there. One night, a young man rose and said, ‘I am not quite sure – but I am going to trust, and I am going to obey.’ I just jotted his words down and sent it with a little story to the Rev. J. H. Sammis, a Presbyterian minister. He wrote the hymn, and the tune was born.”

However, I say that to tell you about a version that a small boy gave based on his interpretation of the same hymn. In his Sunday school class, he was heard singing, “Trust and O.K.”

And isn't that what it is all about? Everything must be O.K. if the life we have been given has truly been committed to His precious keeping. For there is no other way to be happy in Jesus.

Day 14

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What would others say about you when you face adversity?

2. Would they say you know the Shepherd? Why?

3. How will you trust and obey Jesus today?

*Father God, thank You for being the Shepherd; for guiding me home when I'm lost.
Teach me to trust, obey, and know it will all be O.K. Amen.*

Week 3

Two artists attempted to paint a picture of peace. The first drew a beautiful scene, painting an ocean as still as a pond, showing a graceful sailboat passing by. Overhead the sky was blue, flecked with light, fluffy clouds. On the shore children played in the shallows and made castles in the sand. It was a picture of peace, or so it seemed.

The second artist depicted a wild and rocky shore against which angry billows burst in towering clouds of spray. The sky was black with a storm, and the surging waves towered and heaved. Far up on a rocky crag, hidden in a cleft of the rock, sheltered from the wind, sat a bird, safe and secure in her nest, looking out with a serene and untroubled eye at all the turmoil beneath.

Now, for me, I believe it is this second painting that truly captures what a picture of peace is all about.

In the book of Psalms we read, *“Those who live in the shelter of the Most High will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty. This I declare about the Lord: He alone is my refuge, my place of safety; He is my God, and I trust Him”* (Psalm 91:1-2). Interestingly enough, there are approximately 45 references in the book of Psalms speaking to God being such; a refuge, a shelter, a strong tower.

My friends, we are living in very troubled times. The enemy is pressing on every side, because he knows that if he can get our attention off of spiritual things and onto lesser things (other things), he can devour us *“like a roaring lion”* (1 Peter 5:8).

But now, just as it is true in the painting I mentioned above, high upon the rock face, is a cleft, a place of shelter, *“an ever-present help in troubled times”* (Psalm 46:1), if we will so choose to rest, to trust, and to find shelter there.

Mark Twain once said that life is just one darn thing after another. He was right. For no matter how tranquil our day may seem, we can be sure that turmoil is just around the corner. Even Jesus was blessed (that was sarcasm) with the roller-coaster aspects of human life. In fact, He even said, *“Here on earth we would experience troubles”* (John 16:33), but that we should *“take heart, because He had overcome”* (John 16:33).

And this is precisely what it means to ‘take heart.’ It means to trust, to find yourself in the cleft of the rock, sheltered, safe, looking out with a serene and untroubled eye.

My friends, life is no picnic. There are no guarantees, except God, if we should so choose Him. The only hope we have, the only sure thing we can count on, in this ever changing, ever topsy-turvy world, is God – resting in the cleft of His rock. The Bible assures us that His promises never fail (Luke 1:37), and His love will never end (Psalm 136:6).

“Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee” (*Rock of Ages*, by Augustus Toplady).

Day 15

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What storm are you facing today?

2. In the midst of life's storms, are you like the bird in the painting, safe, secure, and at rest?

3. What can you do today to ensure your view of God is as it should be to carry you through your day?

Father God, thank You for being my unchanging, solid rock. You are my place of refuge and source of strength. God, please help me keep focused on You as I face the waves of life. Amen.

Week 3

I read about a first grade boy who stood in front of his classroom to tell about what he wanted to be when he grew up. “I’m going to be a lion tamer and have lots of fierce lions,” he said. “I will walk into the cage and they will roar.” He paused for a moment, thinking through what he had just said, and then added, “But of course, I will have my mommy with me.”

In response to him, may I get personal here and ask, how much greater is our daddy, our Heavenly God, who is always with us, especially when the lions roar?

See, I am convinced, that when death roars its worst, we need not fear, for our Savior is always at His best. The Bible assures us that whatever we face, God is with us, and cannot fail us. This is what John meant when he wrote, “*Greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world*” (1 John 4:4).

You may remember, or heard, that back on August 23, 1996, two young children were gunned down in Jefferson Elementary School in Brooklyn, New York. Now, one of the newspapers that carried this horrific event went on to say that nearly a third of all young boys carry weapons.

Now, please ponder on this for a moment. One-third of the boys attending school carry some sort of weapon?

Now, I am not here to argue whether this is accurate or not, or if such a statement is only a reflection of this particular school system. For me, the greater question is, why are so many kids frightened, insecure, that they feel the need to carry a weapon in the first place?

Well, the article contained the answer. The writer went on to say that the teachers and counselors all pointed out that the families were horribly fractured.

It has been said, as the family goes, so goes the nation, and so goes the whole world in which we live. With regard to the family, society urgently needs “to recover an awareness of the primacy of moral values, which are the values of the human person as such,” thus “recapturing the ultimate meaning of life and its fundamental values” (John Paul II).

Consider for a moment the church, this sacrament of God’s love. She is the communion of faith and life. She is our mother and teacher. She is at the service of the whole human family as it goes forward toward its ultimate destiny. Well, in the same way the family is a community of life and love. It educates and leads its members to their full human maturity, and it serves the good of all along the road of life. The family is the first and most vital cell in all of society. In its own way, it is a living image and historical representation of the mystery of the Church. I heard it said once that the meaning of God’s traditional Christian idea is that the home is to be the Church in miniature. Thus, I contend, that the future of the world, as well as of the Church, passes through the family.

Thus, there is a profound need for God’s love and His healing touch – a healing that only He can bring about.

Day 16

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What fears are you facing today?

2. Who is your family or community of believers that surround you with Christ's love and healing touch?

3. How will you engage those people today to help you claim God's power and love to conquer your fear?

Father God, thank You for modeling family for me, for loving and providing for me like a daddy should. Help surround me with people to call family. Amen.

Week 3

I do not know about you, but I get worn out. Sometimes, it takes about everything I have to just get through a day. And precisely why Jesus invited us to, “*Come to Him, all who are weary and heavy laden, and He would give us rest*” (Matthew 11:28).

Allow me to offer three reasons why we need to take Jesus up on this offer.

First, because our Creator did. In Genesis we read that on the seventh day of all that God had created, He rested. He sat back in a moment of pause and simply enjoyed what He had completed. When was the last time you did that?

In the book *Springs in the Valley*, Lettie Cowman tells a story about a traveler who was making a trek deep in the jungles of Africa. Coolies had been engaged from a tribe to carry their load. The first day they marched rapidly and went far. The traveler had high hopes of a speedy journey. But the second morning these jungle tribesmen refused to move. For some strange reason they just sat and rested. On inquiry as to the reason for this strange behavior, the traveler was informed that they had gone too fast the first day, and that they were now waiting for their souls to catch up with their bodies. Cowman concluded with this reflection: “This whirling rushing life which so many of us live does for us what the first march did for those poor jungle tribesmen. The difference, they knew what they needed to restore life’s balance; too often we do not.”

Second, Canaan rested. Most of us are familiar with the story of how God led His children, the Israelites, out of Egypt (slavery) in order that He might lead them into a land that He had promised – Canaan. Yet, because of their own rebellion, their own want, may I add, their own pace, the first generation of those led out of bondage forfeited God’s rest, God’s best.

You see, the rest in Canaan is a picture of the rest that we experience when we surrender ourselves completely, fully, to God. After the death of Moses, and this first generation of carnality, Joshua led the children of Israel into Canaan. Jesus is our heavenly Joshua, who now longs to lead us into such a place of rest.

Finally, Calvary rested. When Jesus died on the cross, He cried out, “*It is finished.*” Calvary, that place in which Jesus died, begins for us, when by faith, in the finished work of Christ, we enter into the greatest of rest. As the blood of the Passover Lamb was the means of Israel’s redemption from Egyptian bondage, so the Blood of Christ redeems us from the bondage of sin.

I read about a missionary in Africa who offered a ride in the back of his pickup to a national who was walking along the road, struggling beneath the weight he was carrying on his back. The African gladly accepted the ride. However, after a few miles, the missionary glanced in his rearview mirror and was astonished to see the man standing stiffly upright in the back of the truck, still holding his load on his shoulders. The missionary stopped the truck to see why the man was still carrying his load. “I didn’t know,” he said, “that the truck could carry both me and my load.”

Day 17

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. When was the last time you took time to rest and renew your strength?

2. Have you fully transferred your burdens to Jesus?

3. What action will you take today to set up a time of rest where you can unload your worries and fears to Jesus?

*Father God, thank You for being my source of strength and for carrying my burdens.
Teach me how to rest both my body and soul. Amen.*

Week 3

I think there are two words that summarize the lives of most Americans – hurry and worry. Archibald Hart, author of *The Hidden Link Between Adrenaline and Stress*, believes that “adrenaline dependence” has become the greatest addiction problem in our world today. He notes that people become hooked on the energy, pleasure, and confidence that come when the body’s stress hormones – primarily adrenaline and cortisol – are released in emergencies.

But this is not how God designed our bodies. Sure, adrenaline is good in handling life’s emergencies, but it is a problem when we live our lives in a continual state of it – viewing daily stresses as emergencies.

Maybe you can relate to one or more of these common examples; hurrying from one thing to the next, multi-tasking to save time, jump starting your day with an adrenaline stimulant to get going in the morning, to stay alert in the afternoon, or to get psyched up before a meeting, continually passing cars on the freeway, counting people’s items in the grocery line, constantly thinking about what you have to do next when someone is talking to you, working hard even into the late evening hours, grinding your teeth at night in reflection of what you did not get done. All of these are symptoms of hurry and worry.

Sociologists have done studies that show that more and more people look at their watch and feel they are being told, “Please hurry because time is running out and life is winding down.” Makes me want to throw my watch away.

Christian author, Dallas Willard writes, “Hurry is the greatest enemy of spiritual life today. Therefore, we must ruthlessly eliminate it.” Yet, it seems the fourth commandment of God has become lost against the backdrop of today’s lifestyles. Too often, we live like children still fighting sleep, don’t we?

Listen to the words of the prophet Jeremiah. “*Slow down. Take a deep breath. What’s the hurry? Why wear yourself out? Just what are you after anyway? But you say, ‘I can’t quit. I’m addicted to alien gods. I just can’t quit’*” (Jeremiah 2:25).

Some of you might remember Harry Chapin’s classic 1974 folk song *Cat’s in the Cradle*. The song’s lyrics began as a poem written by Harry’s wife, Sandra Gaston, about the awkward relationship between her first husband, James Cashmore, and his father, John, a politician who served as Brooklyn borough president. The song depicts a father who was too busy for his son, until one day, his son was now too busy for him.

I think we need to adhere to the words of Eric Liddell, from the 1981 Academy Award movie *Chariots of Fire*, in light of religious convictions, choosing not to run in the 1922 Olympic games in Paris – “People of character resist the temptation to compromise their values in order to secure their future.”

Day 18

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Do you have a busy day today? If so, why?

2. Where is your focus? Is it on all that needs to be completed, or on Jesus who gives you rest and meets your need?

3. How will you adjust your outlook each day to ensure your hurry goes away and is replaced by God's love?

*Dear Lord, today please help us to slow down and walk with you!
Help us to remain focused on each individual we come in contact with,
as well as every task before us. Amen.*

Week 3

During World War II the United States Marines captured the island of Saipan. Immediately, the Japanese army began ordering the inhabitants to kill themselves by jumping off a nearby cliff. Hundreds of feet below were rocks which would surely prove to be fatal. The American translators began yelling through bullhorns, that those on the cliffs would come to the United States troops, and they would be spared. Three words were yelled over and over and over again – “Come and live. Come and live.” Story has it, that a few did, but most, threw their children off the cliff and then jumped over themselves.

Now, as horrific as this may sound, how often have we done the same when it comes to our lives, though Christ bids us to “Come and live”?

Sure, we are not throwing ourselves over a cliff, but I think that we have thrown ourselves to a lot of lesser things – and the result is still the same – death.

The prophet declares, *“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death”* (Proverbs 14:12).

Growing up in the north country, you are bound to endure winter, with all the activities that come with it. One of those is broom hockey. This is a game played much like the sport of hockey, just with brooms and winter boots, but still played on ice – mostly nearby ponds.

One of the risks, however, is that it is difficult to navigate the ice, to determine whether it is strong enough to endure your play. It is not always easy to see how thin it is until you’re standing on it. And sometimes, it does not end well.

Now listen, broom hockey is a lot of fun, but when the ice gives way, the game takes on a completely different nature. Well, the same is true in life. There are a lot of things that in the moment are fun, they elicit pleasure and joy, but how things can quickly change.

This is why Jesus says, *“Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me...for My yoke is easy, and My burden is light”* (Matthew 11:30).

A yoke was a wooden device used by farmers to link together two animals to plow the fields. A common practice was to put together an oxen that had experience in plowing the fields, with an oxen that was new to the experience. And in this case, Jesus is referring to Himself and us. But for me, the key words here are “learn of Me.” For as Paul instructs us, *“The wisdom of this world is foolishness to God”* (1 Corinthians 3:19).

In 1989, a songwriter/musician, Bill Withers, wrote a song that describes the very essence of what I am getting at – “Lean on me, when you’re not strong, and I’ll be your friend, I’ll help you to carry on.”

Day 19

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What cliff is in front of you?

2. Do you have something preventing you from hearing Jesus calling to you?
What is it?

3. Write down what you will do today to slow down, listen for the voice of God,
and turn everything over to Him.

Father as we reflect upon the struggles we have in life, help us to increase our faith in You and to know that we can do all things through You. Amen.

Week 3

In the book of Job we read, *“Blessed is the man whom God corrects; so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty”* (Job 5:17).

Legendary, and Hall of Fame coach of the Dallas Cowboys, Tom Landry, used to say that the job of a football coach was to make men do what they don’t want to do, in order to achieve what they’ve always wanted to be. And the same could be said of God. Imagine what God desires for us, but for that to happen, much like a parent, discipline is a part of the experience.

In the book of Hebrews it says, *“For the Lord disciplines those He loves”* (Hebrews 12:6). The word ‘discipline’ comes from a Greek word *paideuo*. It primarily denotes the training of a child – synonymous with correction. George Guthrie, Professor of New Testament at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, says that God lovingly disciplines His children to train them in right character.

God’s discipline is not always easy, nor does it always feel good, but we must never ignore the wonderful benefits to our spiritual growth. God’s discipline gives us an entirely new perspective on the Lord’s plan for our lives if we are willing to embrace it. You see, if we enjoyed a steady, uninterrupted stream of blessings, we might think our Father exists solely for our happiness, and we would never know the truth about who He fully is.

Billy Graham once stated, “God does not discipline us to subdue us, but to condition us for a life of usefulness and blessedness. In His wisdom, He knows that an uncontrolled life is an unhappy life, so He puts reins on our wayward souls that they may be directed into the paths of righteousness.”

So, how do we need to respond when God’s tough love comes our way?

First, realize that His discipline is evident that you are really one of His children. He loves us enough to raise us up in His righteousness, by correcting us when we need it, and steering us away from anything that would cause us harm. You see, God knows that in the long run, doing the right thing will bring Him honor and enable us to realize our own highest potential.

Pastor P. G. Matthew writes, “We are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world.”

Second, ask yourself, what is it that God is wanting me to learn? Learn to pray as David prayed, *“Show me Your ways, O Lord; teach me Your paths”* (Psalm 25:4).

Third, is there any sin for which God is disciplining me? The Bible assures us that if we confess, He is faithful and just to forgive (1 John 1:9).

Finally, is there something that God is trying to keep me from doing or stumbling over? Again, we can learn from David – *“Uphold my steps in Your paths, that my footsteps may not slip”* (Psalm 17:5).

Day 20

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What discipline have you recently experienced?

2. What have you learned through that experience?

3. How did you change?

Lord, help us to see the wisdom in the discipline You bring to us! Help us to discern that You keep us from peril if we listen to Your words! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Week 3

I read a story about four preachers who felt the need to start confessing their sins to one another. They said something to the effect, “We are always asking our church members to confess their sins, so why don’t we?” They all agreed.

The first began, “Well, I hate to admit it, but I love beer. I drink at least a six-pack every week.” The second one shared, “I just love sports so much that I have to see every ball game that comes on the TV whether I’ve got my work done or not.” The third preacher said, “I love to eat. I live to eat. I love buffets where I can gorge myself silly.” The fourth finally said, “Well, my big sin is telling stories about others, and I can hardly wait to get out of here.”

Now, the Bible says, “*A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother*” (Proverbs 18:24).

In the 1960s, Jack Warner (who was the last of the five living Warner Brothers) sold his stock for 640 million dollars (that would be estimated in today’s world around \$5.3 billion). A reporter asked him, “How many friends do you have?” What he said pains my heart – “I don’t have a single friend in the whole world.”

What I fear is that many of God’s children may feel the same when it comes to their relationship with God. Let me help with this.

In Paul’s letter to the church of Colossae he writes, “*Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord*” (Colossians 4:7).

Paul is describing for us something incredibly descriptive about friendship – he is a brother, faithful, and a servant of the Lord. What more could anyone ask if they had that?

Well, we all do, when we understand who and what God is. You see, having such a faithful friend as Paul describes Tychicus is one of God’s greatest blessings. No matter what is going on in your life, you can always count on them. When others are checking out, they are always checking in. When the going gets tough, they will not go anywhere.

But in the human world, there is no guarantee that such a friend will always be there. You see, in a human world there are unavoidable circumstances, like relocation, illness, and even death. But as a child of the Almighty, we have a friend who will never leave, regardless.

That friend is the Holy Spirit, the One Jesus called the Helper. He is never fair-weathered. He will never slip in and out when it is to His advantage. The Bible makes it clear when He takes up residence, He comes to stay forever (John 14:16).

Throughout the New Testament, we find countless descriptions of this marvelous companion. His ministry to us, in us, and through us is invaluable. How incredibly wealthy we are to have the Holy Spirit. Truly, He is that friend that sticks closer than a brother.

Day 21

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Who would you identify as your friend who is there no matter what, always checking in?

2. What does your relationship with Jesus look like?

3. How are you growing your relationship with Jesus?

Holy Spirit, may we be so filled with Your love that we never feel alone, knowing that You will never leave us! You are always faithful! Amen.

Week 4

Allen Gardiner may be one of the most unusual men, whose life is not well known, and who, in the eyes of the Christian world, would be deemed a failure. His life was marked by hardship after hardship, throughout his life and his missionary work. But despite it all, he wrote, “While God gives me strength, failure will not daunt me.”

At the age of 57, however, in 1851, while serving on Picton Island at the southern tip of South America, Allen Gardiner died, his body marked by hunger, disease, and loneliness.

The diaries of Gardiner related what transpired at that time. His last entry was September 6, 1851. It would appear that he had attempted to leave the launch to get some fresh water. His body was found on the beach. His diary nearby. The last entry showed the struggle of his shaking hand as he tried to write legibly – “I am overwhelmed with a sense of the goodness of God.”

Now, for our purposes, twenty years prior, in 1831, while on his famous voyage on the Beagle, Charles Darwin had expressed many times his conviction that it was “completely useless to send missionaries to savages such as the Fuegians, probably the lowest example of human race” – the very people that Allen Gardiner was ministering to.

In Paul’s letter to the Corinthian church I think we get a glimpse of what drove Allen Gardiner to give and give, and give some more, with little or nothing in return – “*Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that One died for all, therefore all died*” (2 Corinthians 5:14).

The word ‘compels’ is the word *συνέχω*, meaning ‘to powerfully urge along a line of conduct.’ It is not by any force, but rather an impulse, so great that it evokes a strong intellectual and emotional inclination to respond appropriately. So immense is this force that it demands a response as complete and radical as God’s love for us.

And precisely why we must do the same. Too often our love is marked by the condition that unless given a rightful response, based upon what we deem right, it is quickly withdrawn and given elsewhere. Yet, the love of Christ for us was given regardless. Consider all those who will never accept such a gift, but He gave it anyway.

You see, the world may have never applauded the life and work of one Allen Gardiner, but I have to believe that all of Heaven did, as Jesus said those beautiful words, “*Well done thy good and faithful servant*” (Matthew 25:23).

In Saint Paul’s Cathedral, London, is a life-size, marble statue of Christ writhing in anguish on the cross. Inscribed below are the words, “This is how God loved the world.”

“*Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends*” (John 15:13).

Day 22

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Have you condemned someone as a lost cause? Why?

2. How can you let Christ's love compel you to love unconditionally?

3. Who will be a recipient today of that love?

Dear Jesus, forgive me for turning my back on others, for not showing them the love that You show me. Holy Spirit, let Your love fill me and flow through me to others that I meet today. Amen.

Week 4

In A. W. Tozer's book *Knowledge of the Holy* he wrote, "The whole outlook of mankind might be changed if we could all believe we dwell under a friendly sky, and that the God of Heaven, although exalted in power and majesty, is eager to be friends with us."

The chorus of one of my favorite worship songs goes as follows:

I am a friend of God,
I am a friend of God,
I am a friend of God,
He calls me friend.

These words alone would change your entire outlook on life, as well as in how you live, if you actually believed you dwelt under a friendly sky, and that the God of Heaven, although exalted in power and majesty, is truly, and fully eager, to be your friend.

In James we read concerning Father Abraham. The Bible phrase "friend of God" is found in James 2:23, "*And the Scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness – and he was called a friend of God.'*"

Legend has it that during the days when Thomas Jefferson was President, a group of companions was traveling across the country on horseback when they came to a flooded river. The swollen river had washed away any normal crossing of it. Each rider was forced to ford the river on horseback, fighting for his life against the rapid currents.

A stranger standing on the riverbank asked President Jefferson if he would carry him across the river. The president agreed without hesitation. The man climbed on, and shortly thereafter the two of them made it safely to the other side.

As the stranger slid off the back of the horse onto dry ground, one in the group asked him, "Tell me, why did you select the president to ask for the favor of?" The man was shocked, admitting he had no idea it was the president of the United States. "He was the only one that looked like he wasn't afraid to cross," he said. "So, I asked."

Now consider, a man gets a ride from the President of the United States, but God is infinitely greater than he.

I think we would all agree that friends are vitally important and a great blessing. But what makes it even more awesome with God is that we are not His friend by nature. You see, our sin made us an enemy of God. Paul writes, our "*sinful behavior makes us the enemy of God... but He reconciled us by Christ's death to present us holy in His sight*" (Colossians 1:21-22).

In the Christmas classic, *It's a Wonderful Life*, Clarence the unassuming angel of God leaves a note to George Bailey – "Remember, no man is a failure who has friends" – and how much greater is that truth, knowing that friend is God?

Day 23

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. As you think of your circle of friends, what draws you to them?

2. Do you view God as your friend? Why or why not?

3. What will you do today to deepen your friendship with God?

Lord, help me to remember I have been made holy in Your sight through the death of Your Son, Jesus. Thank You for calling me "friend." May our relationship deepen each and every day throughout my life. Amen.

Week 4

A little Spanish boy in Vigo who became a devout Christian was asked by an Englishman what had been the influence under which he acted. “It was all because of the odd sparrow,” the boy replied. “I do not understand,” said the Englishman in surprise. “What odd sparrow?”

“Well, Señor, it is this way,” the boy said, “a gentleman gave me a Testament, and I read in one Gospel that two sparrows were sold for a farthing. And again, in Luke, I saw, ‘Are not five sparrows sold for two farthings...?’ And I said to myself, that Nuestro Señor (meaning ‘our Lord’) Jesus Christ knew well our custom of selling birds. As you know, Sir, we trap birds, and get one chico for two, but for two chicos we throw in an extra sparrow. That extra sparrow is only a make weight, and of no account at all.”

“Now, I think to myself that I am so insignificant, so poor, and so small that no one would think of counting me. I’m like the fifth sparrow. And yet, oh marvelous, Nuestro Señor says, ‘Not one of them is forgotten before God.’ I have never heard anything like it, Sir. No one, but He, could ever have thought of not forgetting me.”

The Mona Lisa hangs behind bulletproof glass in a gallery in the Louvre Museum in Paris, France, where it has been a part of the museum’s collection since 1804.

The title of the painting comes from a description by Renaissance art historian, Giorgio Vasari, who wrote, “Leonardo undertook to paint, for Francesco del Giocondo, the portrait of Mona Lisa, his wife.” They believe it was painted somewhere between the years of 1503 and 1506. However, others believe he may have continued working on it as late as 1517. The painting is considered to be the most valuable painting in the world. It holds the Guinness World Record for the highest known insurance valuation in history, that of U. S. \$100 million in 1962 (equivalent to \$650 million in 2018).

Now, obviously, the Mona Lisa is not for sale, but you can purchase a postcard of it. I realize that would not be the same as owning the original, but hey, at least it is something, right? Well, sometimes, I think most feel that way, like a postcard, a mere copy of some knock-off original, and worth, well, about the same.

But the fact is, none of us are a cheap imitation of anything, nor simply an inexpensive copy of an original. The Bible tells us, “*We are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus*” (Ephesians 2:10). You are not some ordinary copy of anything. Because of Jesus, you are an extra-ordinary work of art. A priceless gift with a Divine purpose.

“And many a man with life out of tune, and battered and scarred with sin; is auctioned cheap to a thoughtless crowd, much like an old violin. A ‘mess of potage,’ a glass of wine; a game, and he shuffles along. He’s going once, and he’s going twice, he’s going and almost gone. But the master comes, and the thoughtless crowd, can never quite understand. The worth of a soul, and the change that’s wrought by the touch of the Master’s hand” (Myra Brooks Welch).

Day 24

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What do you have that you value?

2. Do others see the value as you do?

3. Who can you value today as Jesus values them?

Lord, we are anew, a masterpiece in Your eyes. Help us to see and value others as You do - a priceless gift with a divine purpose. Amen.

Week 4

During the French and Indian war, a young Colonel George Washington reassured his mother before he left, “The God to whom you commended me madam, when I set out upon a more perilous errand, defended me from harm, I will trust He will do the same now.”

Off he went, to assist an arrogant General Braddock, who refused the warning of the Indian guerrilla strategies. While on his way to Fort Duquesne, a French and Indian ambush caught him by surprise, as they were hiding in the woods and shooting them down like fish in a barrel. Braddock’s men were setting targets. As his men began to retreat, they ran directly into George Washington, and his 300 men, who were riding to their aide. It was chaos. Musket balls filled the air. Washington himself had two horses shot out from underneath him, as well as shrapnel found in his hair. Back and forth, in plain sight, he walked ordering the troops. In fact, one of his soldiers watching him observed, “I expected at any moment to see him fall. Nothing but the superintending care of providence could have saved him.”

A lot of men were lost that day, and it was known as the biggest lopsided loss in American history. Washington later wrote his brother – “As I have heard since my arrival at this place (Fort Cumberland), a circumstantial account of my death and dying speech, I take this early opportunity of contradicting the first, and of assuring you that I have not as yet composed the latter. But, by the all-powerful dispensations of Providence, I have been protected beyond all human probability or expectation; for I had four bullet holes through my coat, and two horses shot under me, yet escaped unhurt, although death was leveling my companions on every side of me.”

I can only wonder how involved God has been in our lives of which He rarely receives credit for. I can only wonder how many angels have been sent on my behalf in light of all the poor decisions I have made. Here’s what I do know, that I have most definitely made some choices that would require the Divine Providence. And my guess, so have you.

Matthew writes, *“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father; even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So, don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows”* (Matthew 10:29-31). A sparrow is worth less than a penny, and yet there is not one piece of corn on the ground that God did not put there for that sparrow to eat. Consider that for a moment. In Leviticus 14 we read how two sparrows were used to cleanse a leper. One was killed and the other was let go. It seems like random chance which one died, but God decided and determined which from the very beginning. The point is that even the smallest things never escape God’s attention. If God so feeds the sparrows, then what do you think He has in mind for His prized creation – you and me? Don’t you think that He watches over, as well as cares, for us, who have been made in His very image?

I believe it is time that we not only say this, but believe it by the way we live. I think we need to be more versed in gratitude just how much we are loved by the Great I Am.

Day 25

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Reflect on your life. Describe a time when the only explanation for your “delivery” through a circumstance can only be Divine Providence.

2. Were you grateful or relieved?

3. Today, choose to have an attitude of gratitude for every “delivery.” Begin by writing down those things that come to mind right now.

Father, thank You for delivering me through the storms in life that happen. May my heart be filled with gratitude and praises. Pouring them out to You, the Great I Am. Amen.

Week 4

Mark Batterson writes in his book *Whisper; How to Hear the Voice of God*, “Those who dance are thought to be mad by those who hear not the music.”

“That old adage,” he writes, “is certainly true of those who walk to the beat of God’s drum. When you take your cues from the Holy Spirit, you will do some things that will make people think you are crazy. So be it. Obey the whisper and see what God does.”

Isaiah could not agree more – “*‘My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,’ says the Lord. ‘And My ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so My ways are higher than your ways and My thoughts higher than your thoughts’*” (Isaiah 55: 8-9).

Louise Redden, a poorly dressed lady with a look of defeat on her face, walked into a grocery store. She approached the owner of the store in a most humble manner and asked if he would let her charge a few groceries. She softly explained that her husband was very ill and unable to work, they had seven children and they needed food. John Longhouse, the grocer, scoffed at her and requested that she leave his store. Seeing her family’s needs, she said, “Please, sir. I will bring you the money just as soon as I can.” John told her he could not give her credit, as she did not have a charge account at his store.

Standing beside the counter was a customer who overheard the conversation between the two. The customer walked to the grocer and said that he would stand good for whatever she needed. John then said in a reluctant voice, “Do you have a grocery list?” “Yes,” replied Louise. “Okay. Put your grocery list on my scales and whatever your grocery list weighs, I will give you that amount in groceries” (talk about a jerk).

Louise hesitated for a moment with a bowed head, then she reached into her purse and took out a piece of paper and scribbled something on it. She then laid the piece of paper on the scale.

The eyes of John and the customer showed amazement when the scales went down and stayed down. Shocked, he turned to the customer and said begrudgingly, “I cannot believe it.” The customer smiled and John began putting the groceries on the other side of the scale. The scale did not balance, so he continued to put more and more groceries on, until the scales would hold no more.

In utter disgust, he grabbed the piece of paper and looked at it with greater amazement. It was not a grocery list, it was a prayer which read, “Dear Lord, you know my needs, and I am leaving this in Your hands.”

“And if you embrace this kingdom life and don’t doubt God, you’ll not only do minor feats like I did...but also triumph over huge obstacles. This mountain, for instance, you’ll tell, ‘Go jump in the lake,’ and it will jump. Absolutely everything, ranging from small to large, as you make it a part of your believing prayer, gets included as you lay hold of God” (Matthew 21:21-22).

Day 26

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What overwhelms you now?

2. Where is your quiet place? If you don't have one, find one today.

3. In your quiet place, ask the Holy Spirit to minister to you and meet your needs.
Write those down and turn them over to God.

Merciful Father, I lay my wants and needs down before You knowing You will meet my needs according to Your Word. "Give all your worries and cares to God, for He cares about what happens to you... (1 Peter 5:7). Amen.

Week 4

One day, in the middle of the woods, a hawk, a lion, and a skunk were arguing about which one was the most powerful. The hawk said it was because he could fly down and catch his dinner so quickly, they could not get away. The lion said he could run the fastest and had the bigger teeth to eat his prey with. The skunk said he was the most powerful, because with one flick of his tail, he could chase them all away.

Round and round they went, arguing about which one was the most powerful. About that time, a large grizzly bear came out from the trees and ate them all.

You know, there have been a lot of people, through the years, who love to brag about their abilities, and of what they have accomplished, much like this hawk, lion and skunk, but when it comes time to prove it, I've discovered, they are not all that impressive.

Sampson was one such guy. He was a man of great strength, but when he tried to use it under the office of his possession, he failed miserably. But when he relied upon God, as the source of that strength, he was always victorious – regardless of odds he may have faced.

This is precisely why Paul pleaded with us, in his letter to the church of Ephesus, *“Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might”* (Ephesians 6:10).

Far too many times, our human tendency is to want to boast in what we have done, of our accomplishments; “Look at what I have done, see what I have accomplished.” Now, we may not profess these audibly, but I contend we do it more than we may want to admit visually – by the way we live, what we own, and who we hang around. But against a rock and hard place, when real life situation come to light, we are left paralyzed.

Now listen, contrary to what some may say, accepting God's will for your life is not a sign of weakness, but rather, it is a sign of strength. Things begin to happen that the world has never known. As the old hymn states, “There is power, power, wonder working power.”

When Moses was called to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt, he was overwhelmed by his inabilities, but when he came to the realization of God's Power, and His willingness to help in every situation, things changed. Moses became an Army of One. Moses realized everything God was asking him to do, he did not have to do. God was going to do it. The Red Sea split, fresh drinking water gushed out of rocks, bread fell from heavens.

When Elijah challenged the prophets of Bahl to call on their gods to make fire fall from the sky, do you know what happened? Nothing. Nothing happened.

But when Elijah called on the mighty power of the One True God, and he built an altar, called for barrels of water to be poured on it and around it, to the point no one thought a fire could start, guess what happened? Fire fell from the heavens and consumed everything.

I think it is time that we believe and live the same.

Day 27

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. In what areas have you failed when you didn't rely on God's strength?

2. Do you know God's will for your life? What is it?

3. What steps will you take today that will allow God to do amazing works through you?

Lord, guide me along the best pathways for my life. Let me rely on You, God as my source of strength through any and all odds I may face. May I give You honor and glory in all situations. Amen.

Week 4

I recently read a story about a 77-year-old granny who made a citizen's arrest when she rugby-tackled a 25-year-old jay walker – who walked across the street before the light turned green.

Story has it, she shouted at the young man as he started to cross the intersection. The old lady said she became even angrier when he hit her with his rucksack as he pushed past her as he reached her side of the street. It was then that she grabbed his hair and managed to wrestle him to the ground where she sat on him until the police arrived, who had been called by another pedestrian. He was taken to a local police station where he was fined for jay walking.

Now, there are worse things in life than jay walking, right, but probably not more embarrassing than having a 77-year-old grandlady taking you down (I am still scared by that afternoon. Just kidding. Really. It was not me. I am serious. Stop it.)

The apostle John writes, however, *“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin”* (1 John 2:1).

Can you imagine? A life without sin. How would that be? Is it possible?

It reminds me about a preacher who announced that there were 726 different sins listed in the Bible. The next week, his phone blew up with his congregation of people requesting a list of those sins. Apparently, they thought they were missing out on something.

I think perhaps, though, many people do not want to live a life without sin. And I am not sure if they believe it is impossible, or rather, they like having at least some sin in their lives. It is like the Sunday School teacher who asked her class, “What are the sins of omission?” After a long pause of silence, one little girl said, “My daddy says they are the sins we ought to have committed, but have not yet.”

Maybe the reason we like sin is because some of them can be quite enjoyable at first – if it feels so good, how could it ever be so wrong, right? While other sins present the need to be in control – which is precisely why we struggle with surrendering our lives in the first place.

Yet, the Bible tells us that Moses did not want any part of it in his life. The writer of Hebrews says that when he had grown up, he (Moses) *“chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time”* (Hebrews 11:24-25).

But here is the deal, sin is wrong because God says it is wrong, and we must do everything we can, with God's help, to overcome it.

You see, when we truly understand Who God is, and the gift He gave us in the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus, our understanding, and want to sin, should dramatically change. *“For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ”* (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Wow. I do not know about you, but that alone changes everything for me.

Day 28

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What sin do you struggle with? Why? Write your prayer of confession.

2. Do you have someone in your life whom you can share this struggle with? If so, who is that? If not, write down the names of friends and pray that God would show you who that person is.

3. Write down the date that you will establish an accountability partnership and mark your calendar.

Father, we all sin and have fallen short of what You expect – that includes me. Help me to recognize my sin and then turn it over to You. Thank You for grace, and thank You for giving me strength to overcome through the help of an accountability partner. Amen.

Week 5

Abraham Lincoln had a favorite riddle he used to put to his colleagues. “If a man were to call the tail of a dog a leg, how many legs would the dog have?” “Five,” was usually the reply. “Wrong,” Lincoln would say with a smile. “The dog still has four legs. Calling its tail a leg, doesn’t make it one.”

Most have probably heard the same idea as Billy Sunday once coined – “Going to church doesn’t make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you an automobile.”

The underlying truth is the same, talk is cheap. According to the Bible, our walking should do our talking. When we say that we are a Christian then we are to conduct our lives in such a way that corresponds to His likeness, anything other is a contradiction.

James tells us that the “*hearers only*” of God’s Word are not the same as the “*faithful doers*” of that same Word (James 1:22).

So, allow me to offer some principles to change.

First, accept God’s gift of Jesus.

When we truly understand the cross, I do not think we would be able to continue to stay cross – if you know what I mean.

You see, sin must be paid for, and there is always a price to be paid for it. The prophet Ezekiel tells us, that the soul that sins must die (Ezekiel 18:20). But thanks be to God for Christ Jesus. “*He personally carried our sins in His body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right. By His wounds you are healed*” (1 Peter 2:24). Are you truly grateful that it was not you on that cross? It should have been.

There is a story about Winston Churchill, who paid a great tribute to the young men in the Royal Air Force who guarded England during the war. “Never in the history of mankind,” he said, “have so many owed so much to so few.”

But Churchill is not just talking about the war in general, but rather a specific part of the war. A battle known as the Battle of Bastogne. It is considered one of the bloodiest actions during all of World War II. Churchill went on to say, “This is undoubtedly the greatest American battle of the war and will, I believe, be regarded as an ever-famous American victory.”

There is a monument there that pays tribute to the heroism of the Royal Air Force – the 101st Airborne Division – “Seldom has so much American blood been shed in the course of a single action. Oh, Lord, help us to remember.”

But I contend, greater still, when thinking of the cross of Christ, we should say – “Never in the history of the universe has mankind owed so much to One.” Until we get this, truly embrace it, we will never understand what it means to live our lives accordingly.

Day 29

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Are you a hearer of the Word or a doer?

2. How would others respond to that question about you?

3. What change will you make today that shows your gratitude for the sacrifice Jesus made for you?

Dear Jesus, thank You for bearing my sins on the cross. Help me today to be a doer of Your Word and to make a difference in the life of somebody today. Amen.

Week 5

Yesterday, we talked about the need to fully accept God's gift in Jesus Christ if we are to live the life that God wants us to live.

Second, we need to agree to obey God's Word.

I heard it said that whatever difficulties this life holds, faithfulness and obedience to God will be rewarded beyond what any hardship may cost.

The disciple John wrote, *"The man who says, 'I know Him,' but does not do what He commands is a liar, and the Truth is not in Him"* (1 John 2:4).

I read about an armed robber who called his mother, on his mobile phone, when he found himself cornered by police during the events. The man was 26 years of age and was trying to rob an electronics shop in Sao Paulo, Brazil, when the police arrived.

He threatened the hostages and said that he would not do anything until he had spoken to his mother. The robber, who had four accomplices, called his mom, and after speaking with her, agreed to release the hostages.

One of the police, after his surrender, stated, "I have never saw anything like this before. It was a classic case of a mama's boy until the end. He literally followed everything she advised him to do, and thus, it all ended well. Thanks mom."

Now, I am not sure about being a 'mama's boy,' but I do believe if we claim to be a child of God, we should be our 'daddy's boy.' By this, I mean, we should be our Father's child and do whatever He says. In Luke we read, *"Blessed are those who hear the Word of God and obey it"* (Luke 11:28).

James writes, *"The man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom (the Bible), and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it – he will be blessed in what he does"* (James 1:25).

Thomas à Kempis once wrote – "Instant obedience is the only kind of obedience there is; delayed obedience is disobedience. Whoever strives to withdraw from obedience, withdraws from Grace."

I have no idea how much of a professional football fan you are, but Roger Staubach was considered one of the greatest. He led the Dallas Cowboys to the Super Bowl five times and was champion two of those times. In 1971, he admitted that his position as a quarterback was a source of trial for him, being that he did not call his own plays. Coach Landry did that. Rogers, however, later said, "When I faced up to the issue of obedience. Once I learned to obey, there was harmony, fulfillment, and of course victory."

There is nothing more that needs to be said. *"If we love Him, we will obey"* (John 14:23).

Day 30

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How do you define obedience?

2. Are there things in your life that hinder or prevent you from living in obedience with God's Word? What are they?

3. Did you identify your accountability partner as part of your actions in Day 28? Reach out today and ask for help with your struggles.

Holy Spirit, help me to be obedient to God's Word and overcome those things that hinder my relationship with Jesus and others. Amen.

Week 5

Allow me to quickly recap. Two days ago, I talked about our need to fully accept God's gift in Jesus, if we are to live the life that God wants us to live. Yesterday, I talked about our need to obey God's Word.

Today, I want to talk about our need to walk what God has written. In other words, to live out what God's Word says.

The Bible says, *"Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did"* (1 John 2:6).

A man went to the store with his three-year-old daughter in tow. Since he was just there to grab some milk and bread, he opted to save some time by not pushing a cart around the store.

"That is not the way mommy does it," his precious little girl informed him. "I know, dear," he replied, "But daddy's way is OK, too."

As he was leaving the store, no cart, and it now raining, he carried the bag of groceries, his precious little daughter, and the milk to the car. Not wanting to set anything down on the wet concrete, he set the jug of milk on top the car, quickly open the door, scooted the groceries in, and set his daughter in her car seat. He quickly then climbed in the car himself, completely forgetting about the milk he left on top of the car.

"That's not the way mommy does it," she informed him again. "Honey, there's more than one way to do things," he replied impatiently. "Daddy's way is OK, too."

As they pulled out, and headed down the street, he became very aware of the scraping sound of the milk on the roof, but too late. As the jug of milk slid down the length of the rooftop, bounced off the trunk of the car and splattered to the ground, it sent forth a froth of white in every direction.

As he was processing his mistake, his young daughter's voice, in the most serious of manner, broke the frustration of it all, "That's NOT the way mommy does it."

The fact is, at least in our home, the way mommy does some things is really good. But for me, and more importantly, I need to remember the way daddy does it, well, it is even better – and I am talking about our Heavenly Daddy.

Jesus exhorted, *"Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?"* (Luke 6:46).

Author and playwright, James Baldwin, once wrote, "Children have never been good at listening to their elders, but they have never failed to imitate them. Sometimes we, too, don't listen very well."

Day 31

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What things in your life do you choose to do your way rather than God's way?

2. In what ways aren't you obeying God's Word, and why?

3. Write down the actionable steps you will start today to walk the life God wants you to.

*Dear God, help me with my struggles and lead me through my day.
Help me to follow You and do things according to Your will. Amen.*

Week 5

A priest, a minister, and a rabbi wanted to see who was best at their job. So, they decided that each go into the woods, find a bear, and attempt to convert it, and later in the week they would get together and compare results.

The priest was first to speak, “When I found the bear, I read to him from the Catechism, sprinkled some holy water on him, and next week, well, it will be his first communion.”

“Wow,” said the minister. “I found a bear by a stream, and preached to him from God’s holy Word. The bear was so convicted that he let me baptize him.”

They both look down at the rabbi, who had been listening, though lying on a hospital bed in a body cast. “Looking back,” he said, “maybe I should not have started with the circumcision.”

Now, here is the deal, a different kind of life, a God-life, produces a different kind of lifestyle, but one of the marks of that life is gratitude. And it was gratitude that prompted an old man to visit an old broken pier on the eastern seacoast of Florida. Every Friday night, until his death in 1973, he would return, walking slowly, slightly stooped, with a large bucket of shrimp. The sea gulls would flock to this old man, and he would feed them from his bucket. You see, many years before, October 1942, Captain Eddie Rickenbacker was on a mission to deliver an important message to General Douglas MacArthur. But there was an unexpected detour, which would place Captain Eddie into the most harrowing adventure of his life.

Somewhere over the South Pacific they became lost. With fuel now dangerously low, the men ditched their plane in the ocean. For nearly a month, Captain Eddie and his companions would brave the water, the weather, and the scorching sun. They spent many nights, sleepless, as giant sharks circled, and at times, rammed their raft.

But of all their enemies they would face, none proved more formidable than starvation. Eight days out, their rations were gone. It would take a miracle to sustain them. And the miracle would come. Listen to how Captain Eddie unfolds the events that would transpire – “Captain William Cherry had just finished with a prayer for deliverance. My hat pulled down over my eyes to keep out some of the glare, I began to doze off. It was then that something landed on my head. I knew that it was a sea gull. I don’t know how, I just knew, and everyone else did too. No one said a word, but peering out from under my hat, without moving my head, I could see the expression on their faces. They were staring at that gull. The gull meant food, all I needed to do, was to catch it.”

Captain Eddie did catch it. Its flesh was eaten. Its intestines were used as bait to catch fish. They survived, because of a lone sea gull, uncharacteristically, hundreds of miles from land.

“I meditate on all Your activity; I eagerly ponder over the work of Your hands” (Psalm 143:5).

Day 32

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How would you describe your lifestyle? Does it include gratitude?

2. What's in your bucket? What are you thankful for?

3. What is God doing in your life because of those things in which you are thankful?

*Father, thank You for filling my bucket. Let my day be full of
gratitude for Your provision. Amen.*

Week 5

Mitsuo Fuchida was the commander of the Japanese Air Force that led 860 planes against Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Jacob DeShazer was an American bomber pilot who, on April 18, 1942, flew a dangerous raid against the city of Nagoya.

It was during this raid that DeShazer lost his way, and was forced to eject when the plane ran out of fuel. He was captured, tortured, and threatened to be killed. For nearly two years, DeShazer suffered from hunger, cold and dysentery.

In May of 1944, he was given a Bible, and after reading it for weeks, DeShazer came across Romans 10:9, and accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. As he continued to read, he was particularly struck by the words of Jesus, *“I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”* (Matthew 5:44). DeShazer was a changed man, and began to treat the guards differently. With all hostility gone, he began to show them the love Jesus had shown him.

Following the war, DeShazer returned to Japan, but this time, as a missionary, and distributed copies of his testimony – “I was a prisoner of the Japanese.” The Japanese people were amazed by his forgiveness of his former enemies, and flocked to hear him speak. DeShazer decided to start a church in the very city that he had bombed years earlier.

As a result of his testimony, a former officer in the Japanese Air Force was saved and was eager to meet DeShazer. The two men became friends and began working to spread the Gospel all over Japan. That man was Mitsuo Fuchida, the leader I mentioned earlier, of the Pearl Harbor attacks. Fuchida became one of the most successful evangelists in Japan. And all of this happened because Jacob DeShazer made the decision to live a lifestyle of forgiveness and love.

This may be our biggest challenge in our country today, as Christians. But being like Christ means we must forgive as Christ, and to love the same.

Please do not miss this, but as a follower of Christ, whether you were the offender or the one offended, the ball is always in our court to go and make it right. Listen to the words of Jesus, *“When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there, before the altar, and go: first be reconciled with your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift”* (Matthew 5:23-24).

When it comes to being like Jesus, our biggest challenge just might be forgiveness. For it goes against our human inclinations, but not against His. Our tendency is to want to ‘settle the score’ or to ‘get even.’ C. S. Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*, writes, “It goes against our human perspective at its worst. We desire revenge or retribution. This is why Jesus gave so much attention to the issue of forgiveness.”

But the fact is, it is impossible to have the relationship that God wants for us to have, if we harbor any and all unforgiveness.

Day 33

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Do you have a grudge against someone, or have you offended someone?
Who is that?

2. Write a prayer to Jesus asking Him to overflow you with His love for that person.

3. When will you go to that person and reconcile?

Dear Lord, fill me with Your love and give me the courage to talk with those I have offended, and give me compassion for those I need to reconcile with. Amen.

Week 5

What we have in Christ...
A love that can never be fathomed;
A life that can never die;
A righteousness that can never be tarnished;
A peace that can never be understood;
A rest that can never be disturbed;
A joy that can never be diminished;
A hope that can never be disappointed;
A glory that can never be clouded;
A light that can never be darkened;
A happiness that can never be interrupted;
A strength that can never be enfeebled;
A purity that can never be defiled;
A beauty that can never be marred;
A wisdom that can never be baffled;
Resources that can never be exhausted.

(Author Unknown)

Why do we settle for less when God has for us so much more?

It reminds me of the story where a hungry fox was chasing down a hen. After about a mile a rabbit came on the way and the fox started chasing the rabbit. After about another mile, a rat came out, and the fox began chasing the rat. Finally, the rat ran into its hole, of which the fox ended up waiting in front of.

How many times have we gotten distracted with lesser things?

Have you ever considered what God truly and fully desires for you? In Jeremiah we read, *“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you future and a hope”* (Jeremiah 29:11).

In Malachi we read, *“Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of Heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it”* (Malachi 3:10). I recognize that this verse is specifically addressing God’s people and their refusal to tithe appropriately. But this same God in light of your finances is the same God who is calling us to live by such faith.

Thus, if we are going to experience the best that God has for us, then I contend that we need to be refreshed in this same God who is in us. We need to pray as David prayed, *“Give me a new heart, and make a right Spirit within me”* (Psalm 51:10).

One little girl said it best, “The Lord is my shepherd and that’s all I want.”

Why settle for less when you are guaranteed God’s best? If you are going to settle for anything, then settle that within in your life, and then be prepared to witness His hand working it out.

Day 34

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Are you able to identify the distractions in your life? What are they?

2. How can you eliminate those distractions so your actions are according to God's plan?

3. What steps will you take today to eliminate those distractions?

Dear Jesus, You are all that I need. Help me to keep my focus on You and live according to Your plan. Amen.

Week 5

As a young man, Oswald Chambers, who wrote the beloved, *My Utmost For His Highest*, battled a persistent sense of barrenness in his Christian life.

He wrote, “I was getting desperate. I knew no one who had what I wanted; in fact, I did not know what I did want. But I knew that if what I had was all the Christianity there was, the thing was a fraud.”

“At a little meeting in Dunoon, a well-known lady was asked to take the after-meeting. She did not speak, but set us to prayer, and then sang, ‘Touch me again, Lord.’ I felt nothing, but I knew emphatically my time had come. I rose to my feet. Then and there, I claimed the gift of the Holy Spirit in dogged committal on Luke 11:13.”

“I had no vision of heaven or of angels; I had nothing. I was as dry and empty as ever, no power or realization of God, no witness of the Holy Spirit. Then, I was asked to speak to a meeting and forty souls came out to the front. I came to realize that God intended me, having asked, to simply take it by faith, and that power would be there. I might see it only by the backward look, but I was to reckon on the fact that God would be with me.”

From that point on, Oswald Chambers ministered with extraordinary power. His words and his writings, touching people around the world, especially when he taught, as he frequently did, from his favorite verse – “*If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him*” (Luke 11:13).

Far too many Christians, I have come to witness, are exactly where Oswald Chambers was: dry, empty, and may I add powerless. Not because the power, and realization of God, is not available to them. But because they have not come to realize that God loves them enough to give them His very best of everything He has, every time they should ask.

The Scottish minister, Andrew Murray, once stated, “God is ready to assume full responsibility for the life wholly yielded to Him.”

Legendary evangelist, author, teacher, Dwight L. Moody, was one such man. Dwight was a poorly educated, un-ordained, shoe salesman, who felt the tug of God’s call to preach the Gospel. And it was the words of his friend, Henry Varley, who set his dream in motion – “The world has yet to see what God can do with and for and through and in a man who is fully and wholly consecrated to Him.”

Who do we believe God really is? What do we believe that God can really do? As I said on day one, our knowledge of God affects everything in our lives – our relationship with Him, His relationship with us, and our relationship with others. You see, how we perceive Him has a lot to do with how we will receive Him and believe in Him.

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us” (A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*).

Day 35

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Where are you at in your walk with Jesus?

2. Is there anything in your life that you have not wholly yielded to Him?

3. What do you feel God can do in and through your life?

*Dear God, I surrender my plans and want to live according to Your will.
Holy Spirit, work through me today so others can meet Jesus. Amen.*

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