

Luke Devotionals

DEVOTIONALS GOSPEL OF LUKE

Today in the Word

Moody Bible Institute

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LUKE 1

Luke 1:1-4

So that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. - Luke 1:4

TODAY IN THE WORD

During the height of The Da Vinci Code media craze, about 10 percent of the books on Amazon.com's bestseller list were dedicated in full or in part to disproving commonly held beliefs about Jesus Christ and Christianity. The question everyone wanted answered was, "What do we really know about Jesus?"

Some thirty or so years after Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension, that question was already prevalent in the land where He had lived. If Luke saw the need to establish certainty in Theophilus, the recipient of Luke's Gospel and his book of Acts, we should not be surprised that many today still have questions about Jesus. The abundance of other attempts to compile reliable versions of events shows the widespread need for accuracy that was felt by followers of the Word (v. 1).

Luke was particularly qualified to provide us with an authoritative account of the gospel. As a doctor, he had special insight into the physical and medical details about Christ and those He healed, but more important, his close relationship with Paul gave him a thorough understanding of the teachings of Christ as well (Col. 4:14).

Luke also thoroughly investigated all the available information from written records, eyewitnesses, and authoritative teachers (vv. 2-3). Luke had absolute certainty in mind as he wrote. The Gospel of Luke isn't just one man's version—Luke compiled facts from a variety of trusted sources so that Theophilus, and all of us who read this book, could be sure that the Christian faith is based on true, historically accurate information and profoundly authoritative teaching from the life of Christ.

This month we'll study the entire Gospel of Luke, focusing on the reassuring evidence that Jesus is the Christ and that the opposition we face from the world should not shake our confidence in the eternal truth of God's Word.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Many eyewitnesses to the events in Luke did not believe in Christ. While it's important to be able to defend the historical accuracy of the Bible, faith isn't solely a matter of knowing the facts. Even if we had video footage of Christ's entire life, that wouldn't be enough to save us. Faith is a spiritual matter, so pray today that God would move in the hearts of your unsaved friends and family.

Luke 1:1–4

Christmas: Telling the Truth

If you've ever returned to your elementary school as an adult, you might have been surprised that things did not look exactly as you remembered them. The hallways seem shorter and the desks so much smaller. It is the same place, certainly, but your perspective has changed.

This month we will study the people in the Nativity story, and we are going to attempt an honest, realistic look at the characters in each passage. Many of our ideas about the Christmas story have been formed by movies, crèche sets, and pageants. What really happened? What does the Bible tell us about the days before and following our Savior's birth?

Today's passage is the beginning of the Gospel of Luke. He addresses "you, most excellent Theophilus" in verse 3. Theophilus's name means "dear to God" or "friend of God." Other than that small clue, the recipient's exact identity is unknown, but the purpose of the Gospel is clear. Luke, a physician by training, wanted to recount the events surrounding the birth, life, and ministry of Jesus Christ. In the first verse, he distinguishes his effort from "many" others. He also acknowledges that his will not be the only account given about the works of Christ and His disciples.

He then describes why he is particularly fit to share the story. Luke had access to the eyewitnesses who had experienced these events (v. 2). In addition to their stories, Luke had “carefully investigated everything” (v. 3). As a historian, he promised to write down each event in an organized and orderly way. Why? His answer is in verse 4. It is important for us to know the truth about our Lord and to have confidence in the story of His miraculous birth.

KEY VERSE So that you might know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:4)

Apply the Word - Pray that God will use this study of the people in the story of the Nativity to help you appreciate the meaning of the Christmas season. Use your Bible study as a discussion with loved ones. Talk about your memories of each Bible character, and compare your impressions with the reality found in these pages of Scripture. May we have a fresh perspective on the truth!

Luke 1:1-4

I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning. - Luke 1:3

TODAY IN THE WORD

Thucydides, author of the History of the Peloponnesian War (written around 424 B.C.) is regarded as the first true historian. He included concise, objective, and detailed descriptions of events in a war between Athens and Sparta, along with analytic commentary. In addition to using his firsthand knowledge as a former army general, Thucydides interviewed eyewitnesses, examined battle sites, and studied war-related documents. He wanted to report the truth as accurately as possible.

Luke approached writing his Gospel narrative with the same attitude. Before writing, he had “carefully investigated everything from the beginning” and was well aware of fulfilled prophecies and oral traditions handed down from eyewitnesses (vv. 1-3). As was the case with Peter yesterday, Luke stressed these first-person accounts, as well as noting his own research, both within the context of the proclamation of the gospel message (the “eyewitnesses” were also “servants of the word”). Though his point here is not to give a detailed description of the process of divine inspiration, we do see part of the human dimension of God's supernatural work of inspiration.

Luke wrote an “orderly account” that would strengthen believers' faith and give them confidence in the “certainty of the things [they] have been taught” (v. 4). “Theophilus” means “friend of God” or “one who loves God” and is almost certainly a general address, as when writers used to begin, “Gentle reader.” New believers might have wondered about the stories and doctrines they'd been taught. Luke wanted them to know that the facts had been checked, that their faith had foundations.

Part of the Bible's overall truthfulness is its historical reliability. Our faith is built on facts, chief among them the fact of the Resurrection. Christ's resurrection from the dead is not just an inspiring concept, symbol, or tradition, but an historical event that occurred at a specific point in space and time.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

One of the classic chapters of Scripture, 1 Corinthians 15, is based on the historicity of Christ's resurrection. If this key event never actually happened, wrote Paul, then we ourselves have no hope of resurrection, and in that case “we are to be pitied more than all men” (1 Cor. 15:19). Take a little extra time in your devotions today to read through this entire chapter.

Luke 1:1–56

To celebrate the 75th birthday of F. A. Porsche, grandson of the founder of Porsche Design, the company offered an extravagant “Advent Calendar” for sale this past Christmas season. The “calendar” consisted of a selection of Porsche products, 24 in all, including designer sunglasses, running shoes, cuff links, a gold watch, a complete kitchen, and a 28-foot speedboat. Sold through the London department store, Harrods, it cost \$1 million.

That's a lot of money to spend to miss the point! Advent calendars are not about giving or getting expensive gifts, but rather about the true meaning of Christmas, the birth of Jesus Christ. Angelic announcements of this world-changing event are what open the Gospel of Luke, the book we'll be studying this month in Today in the Word. Luke was a medical doctor, a friend and ministry companion of the apostle Paul, and a careful historian. In addition to his Gospel, he also wrote the Book of Acts, a record of the early church. Both works are dedicated to Theophilus, probably a fellow believer and wealthy patron who sponsored the writing. Luke's main theme, as in all the Gospels, is the good news that Christ came to redeem us, and that this has been God's loving plan throughout history (cf. Gen. 3:15).

The angel Gabriel actually proclaimed two miraculous births in Luke's first chapter. First, he announced that the Messiah's forerunner, John the Baptist, would be born to an older, barren couple (reminiscent of Abraham and Sarah). He made this announcement to the prospective father, Zechariah, as he was fulfilling his priestly duties at the temple in Jerusalem. The baby

would bring joy, would be a prophet full of the Holy Spirit, and would preach a message of repentance to the people.

Second, Gabriel announced that the Messiah Himself, the Son of God, would be born to a younger, engaged—but-not-yet-married couple (as prophesied in Isa. 7:14). He made this announcement to the prospective mother, Mary, at her home in Nazareth. The baby would be a king in the line of David and the Son of the Most High God.

Apply the Word

Despite a life of obedience in priestly ministry, Zechariah responded to the angel's announcement of John's birth with fear and doubt. By contrast, Mary, an inexperienced and untested young woman, responded to the even more incredible announcement of her virgin conception with humble trust. The quality of her humility and faith is seen in verses 46 through 55, a passage known as the Magnificat. Pray these words of adoration to God in your own prayer time today.

Luke 1:5–12

Zechariah: An Old and Righteous Man

In the United States, almost 40 million adults are age 65 or older. Currently, the average lifespan for men is over age 82; for women it is age 85. Health and wellness statistics tell us that adults in the United States can expect to age better than ever before.

Today, we will look at an older man who was indeed aging well and who played a key role in setting the stage for the Nativity. In Luke 1:5, we meet Zechariah, who was born in the time of Herod. Herod the Great ruled from 40 to 4 b.c. (While Herod is mentioned here, his role in the Nativity is more significant later in the story.)

We also learn that Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, were “righteous in the sight of God” (v. 6). This alone is a high compliment, and the verse goes on to say that they were blameless in their spiritual walk. But despite their faithfulness to God, Zechariah and Elizabeth were barren: they had been unable to have children and were “very old” (v. 7). Note that at the beginning of the Nativity story, before telling of the miraculous birth of our Savior, we meet a couple physically unable to bear children. They needed a miracle.

At this time of year, one priest would be chosen to enter the temple and offer incense (v. 8). According to Bible scholars, this was a once in a lifetime opportunity for any priest. Zechariah was deeply honored. We are told that people gathered outside to pray during the offering (v. 10). Imagine Zechariah's surprise when an angel of the Lord appeared to him, just to the right of the altar! What he did not know was that the angel would deliver news that would change his life forever.

KEY VERSE Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. (Luke 1:6)

Apply the Word Zechariah realized that he was in the presence of God, yet he was shocked to see an angel waiting to deliver a personal message to him. Are you aware that God is present with you as well? And He will use His Word and His Holy Spirit to speak directly into your life. As you spend time in prayer, tell God that you are open to hearing His message to you.

Luke 1:18-25

Be merciful to those who doubt. - Jude 22

TODAY IN THE WORD

Abraham's and Sarah's early responses to God's pledge that they would have a son and become a great nation were something less than faith-filled. Abraham, for example, pointed out to God that in his currently childless family, one of his servants stood to inherit everything (Gen. 15:1-3). And Sarah is famous for laughing to herself at such an absurd promise: “After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?” (Gen. 18:10-14).

Zechariah was a priest, so one might think he would have trusted and rejoiced in the angel's message. Instead, like Abraham and Sarah and so many other believers throughout history, his response was less than exemplary. “How can I be sure of this?” he asked, then informed the angel of the obvious fact that he and his wife were elderly (v. 18). He gave no indication he had heard the prophecies about spiritual greatness and Elijah.

Gabriel did not argue, offer proofs, or even restate the promises, but rather responded with a simple statement of his identity and mission: “I stand in the presence of God” (v. 19). Gabriel was rebuking Zechariah, saying, how could you possibly doubt my message, given who I serve? This statement was the ultimate guarantee that the news was trustworthy.

This implied rebuke was swiftly made explicit: because of Zechariah's lack of faith, he would not be able to speak until the angel's words came to pass (v. 20).

Though the people waiting outside showed no special interest in the content of Zechariah's vision, he must have been able to share the news with Elizabeth, perhaps through gestures and writing. She responded with praise and faith (v. 25), unlike her husband.

As we shake our heads at Zechariah's shortsightedness, we should probably shake our heads at our own lack of faith as well. We would do even better to follow the exhortation in today's verse: "Be merciful to those who doubt" (Jude 22).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Despite a heavenly vision and a remarkable promise, Zechariah didn't show much faith in today's reading. You have a chance to do better! When God places people on your heart for prayer, pray for them even though you might think their situation is hopeless. When He instructs you to follow Him, obey in faith, even though you don't understand how you'll accomplish this. God delights to receive glory from His power working through His people.

Luke 1:26-45

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. - Isaiah 9:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

Photographers who develop their own film must enter a special darkroom where they roll exposed film on a special spool, which is immersed into various chemicals. Any light would ruin the film during this process. Even experienced photographers admit that their eyes never stop searching for light while working in this darkroom. That's because human eyes never fully adjust to complete darkness.

An even more profound darkness existed in the years before Jesus' birth. The Roman Empire ruled Palestine, and many Jewish religious leaders were corrupt. Devout Jews were straining in the darkness, hoping for some glimpse of light, just as the prophet Isaiah had predicted.

Among those devout Jews were Elizabeth and Mary. The first part of Luke 1 describes how Zechariah and Elizabeth found out that they would be the parents of John, who would go before the Lord and would be filled with the Holy Spirit from his birth. The rest of Luke 1 announces an even more remarkable birth. It's natural that Mary was troubled at Gabriel's greeting. Not only was the sight of an angel overwhelming, but Mary was a young girl living in a poor village. In what way could she be highly favored?

Even more astounding was that her child would reign on the throne of David . . . forever. Interestingly, Mary didn't question Gabriel about this or seek a sign as Zechariah had done. Instead, she asked a logistical question: how could a virgin conceive a child? Gabriel's response showed that Jesus' birth was only possible because of the creative activity of God's Holy Spirit.

Jesus' birth was like no other human birth. The wording here echoes the description of the Spirit's work at creation, hovering over the formless void and then breathing life into Adam. Just as the first human's existence was possible only through God's direct involvement, so too the birth of the perfect human being, Jesus, was only possible through God (v. 37).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Luke's Gospel gives great attention to the Holy Spirit. Luke's account of Jesus' birth reveals the Spirit's involvement at every stage. Read through Luke 1-2, noting the role of the Holy Spirit. Notice how the Spirit fills Mary with tremendous faith, and fills Elizabeth with overflowing joy. These are evidences of the Spirit's presence in the life a believer. What other characteristics of the indwelling Spirit can you find? How are these reflected in your own life?

Luke 1:37 John 11:1-44

Nothing is impossible with God. - Luke 1:37

TODAY IN THE WORD

Eva had always resisted religion . . . that's what weak people needed. She could take care of herself. Even when her husband died, she raised three children and provided well for them. When her daughter became a Christian, she dismissed it as a passing teenage fancy. But her daughter's faith grew. Years later, her daughter and son-in-law continued praying for Eva. Finally, at sixty-eight, Eva accepted the Lord. But six months later she was diagnosed with terminal cancer and died just before her seventieth birthday.

Although she didn't have many months to live, Eva's bold witness to Christ the year following her conversion touched countless lives. When she died, her friends, family, and hospital attendants had heard the gospel and saw living proof of its power in Eva's life.

God's glory is often revealed in tragedy, as today's passage shows. It surely grieved Jesus' heart to learn that His friend had

become so ill (v. 5). Yet Jesus knew that God would reveal His glory through this incident. In fact, instead of rushing to heal Lazarus, Jesus delayed going to Bethany, which allowed for Lazarus' death (v. 21).

Without the greater story of God's glory, this delay seems cruel. But notice that Jesus said that He was glad that He hadn't reached Lazarus "in time" (v. 15). Jesus knew that people's greatest need was to believe in the one true God.

Jesus' conversation with Martha set the stage for realizing that "resurrection" was not some distant theological hope. Instead, Jesus boldly declared, "I am the resurrection and the life!" (v. 25). Prior to Lazarus' resuscitation, Martha had no idea what this meant!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus knew that His prayers were heard because He always prayed according to the Father's will. There's a profound lesson for us.

Luke 1:26-38

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. - Luke 1:32

TODAY IN THE WORD

When Gabriel said to Mary, "Greetings, you who are highly favored!" (v. 28), it was more than just a friendly hello. The scriptural concept of God's favor is a powerful one typically associated with righteousness and blessing. God's "anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime," the psalmist tells us (Ps. 30:5). In another psalm, we learn: "[T]he Lord bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless" (Ps. 84:11). And in Proverbs, Wisdom announces: "Whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the Lord" (Prov. 8:35).

The message Gabriel brought, however, didn't sound at first like a blessing. For a virgin (v. 27) to become pregnant (v. 31) was a shameful impossibility, a possible death sentence. It would likely put an end to her betrothal (something more than a modern engagement but not yet an actual marriage). Was God going to show His favor by making her into an unwed teenage mother? Yes. Mary would become pregnant, and the child would be named "God saves." In Him, the covenant of David and the prophecies of Isaiah would be fulfilled (vv. 32-33).

How did Mary answer? Humanly speaking, she had even more reasons to doubt the angel's message than did Zechariah. Her first words don't sound so different, but they're different enough. "How will this be?" (v. 34) shows faith that it will happen. Gabriel accepted her response and answered her question. The impossible would take place through the agency of the Holy Spirit, and the child would be the Son of God (v. 35). As a concrete sign and encouragement, he also told her of Elizabeth's pregnancy, already in its sixth month (v. 26).

Mary's faith is inspiring (v. 38). A young woman who could not possibly have comprehended all the implications of Gabriel's message, she nonetheless affirmed, "I am the Lord's servant," submitting herself entirely to His goodness and power.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Just because it's Christmas doesn't mean our problems have all gone away. Perhaps you're in a tough situation right now—facing a health crisis, a financial tight spot, or other dilemma. Be encouraged by what Gabriel told Mary: "Nothing is impossible with God" (v. 37). Apply this verse to where you're at right now. God already knows all about your situation, He loves you perfectly and is working for your eternal good, no matter how overwhelming the problem might appear to be (Rom. 8:28).

Luke 1:13–20

Zechariah: You Will Have a Son

A village in West Africa had saved for years to build a church. Once it was complete, they heard that an urban planning group had decided to build a road that would cut directly through their building. Devastated, the people gathered to fast and pray, asking God to preserve their church. Imagine their joy when the engineer returned, saying his plans had changed and the new road would affect only an outer corner. God answered their prayers!

The angel's appearance to Zechariah was shocking and unexpected. The angel's message was even more startling and unexpected because it was good news: Zechariah's prayers had been heard and answered. The couple's prayers for a child had not gone unnoticed. The angel said Zechariah and Elizabeth would be given a son that they were to name him "John" (v. 13), and he would have an amazing role to play in setting the stage for the Messiah.

Their son John would be "great" (v. 15), with a life marked by commitment to God. He would proclaim the arrival of the Messiah and lead many in the nation of Israel to the Lord God. In verse 17, the prophet Elijah is mentioned—John would be like him in spirit and power. It is hard to imagine the thoughts that were racing through Zechariah's mind. He was certainly shocked to see the angel. But

to hear that his prayers were answered? After so many years?

Zechariah responded to the angel in verse 18, expressing some doubt. He gave the logical, human perspective on the situation, outlining obstacles: “I am an old man” (v. 18). The angel repeated the authority of God and pronounced that Zechariah, because of his disbelief, would be unable to speak until John was born (v. 20).

KEY VERSE He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. (Luke 1:16)

Apply the Word When you pray, do you believe God hears you and will answer? Today’s passage reminds us that God does hear and answer, but not always in the way or in the timeframe that we expect. If you have a prayer request that you’ve presented to the Lord for weeks, months, or even years, take comfort in the fact that He does hear and He will answer.

Luke 1:21–25

Elizabeth: From Disgrace to Praise

We have spent the past two days examining the character of Zechariah, the priest who encountered an angel. Scripture is also concerned about the character of his wife, Elizabeth. How would she react to this news?

Like Zechariah, Elizabeth is described as “righteous” (v. 6). We know that she was “childless” and “very old” (v. 7). Elizabeth was descended from the line of Aaron, the priestly line. Her reputation and lineage were impeccable. She and Zechariah had prayed for God to give them a child, but now the realities of biology had led them to think that God’s answer was no.

Zechariah left the temple, unable to speak, and those who were present realized he had seen a vision. He motioned to them but was unable to explain (v. 22). He returned home, which was probably not far from Jerusalem.

Scripture doesn’t tell us how he conveyed the wonderful, shocking news to his wife, but the text implies that they responded to this news in faith. Elizabeth indeed became pregnant.

As was the custom of the time, Elizabeth kept herself in “seclusion” for five months. This pregnant elderly woman saw her growing belly as an outward sign of God’s favor (v. 25). Indeed, in Scripture, children are a blessing from God (Deut. 28:4; Psalm 128:3). The child growing in her womb was a miraculous answer to her prayers.

Many women throughout the Bible struggled with infertility: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hannah, and now Elizabeth. Each prayer was answered, but not always in an expected way. Their stories also reveal something about the tender heart of God toward these women who longed to be mothers.

KEY VERSE The Lord has done this for me . . . he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace. (Luke 1:25)

Apply the Word - At Christmas, when we celebrate the birth of our Savior, we can also give thanks for the children in our lives. Also pray for those who struggle with infertility, that God will provide hope and comfort in their times of need. Pray to the God who blessed Sarah, Hannah, and Elizabeth that He will continue to answer prayers in unexpected ways.

Luke 21:1-4

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 1944, the war-torn villages of Europe were filled with orphans. One morning an American soldier noticed a young boy staring through the window of a pastry shop. The boy hadn’t eaten in days. Each time the baker put a new batch of rolls on his counter, the boy licked his lips and groaned.

The soldier knew what he should do. He entered the bakery and returned moments later with a sack full of warm pastries. He handed the bag to the hungry child. As he turned to walk away, he felt a tug on his jacket. “Mister,” the little boy inquired, “are you God?”

In a stingy world that advocates getting as its goal, giving sets us apart. In the words of Chuck Swindoll, “We are never more like God than when we give.”

Consider the brief incident in Luke 21:1-4. With His disciples, Jesus observed the goings-on in a part of the Temple called the Court of the Women. The treasury was located here, and people were bringing gifts and offerings. Rich people were seen making sizable donations (v. 1). But it was the contribution of a poor widow that caught Jesus’ attention. She offered two very small copper coins—a mere pittance (v. 2). Yet Jesus singled out this anonymous woman for a quick lesson on generosity.

What made her gift so special, so pleasing to the Lord? First, it was done quietly. No great fanfare, just a simple act. Second, it was

done willingly. At Passover season, voluntary offerings were customary. Most likely this was a free-will offering, not a tithe. Third, it was done sacrificially. The rich gave “out of their wealth” (the word used here is the same word used to describe the leftover fish and bread on those occasions when Jesus fed the multitudes). Jesus realized that the widow’s two coins were “all she had to live on” (v. 4).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

God wants us to develop the quality of generosity. How much we give is not so important as that we give and that we do so with the right attitude. Perhaps the acronym G-I-V-E can help you make generosity a cherished family value in your home:

Go to God in prayer. Confess any greedy or materialistic attitudes. Thank Him for His blessings.

Invent new and creative ways to give. For example, have your family save its change each month and sponsor a hungry child from a developing nation.

Volunteer your time and resources to serve God and others. Open your home. Make your mini-van available.

Luke 1:26–33

The Angel Gabriel: Winged Messenger

According to several recent polls, more Americans believe in the existence of angels (55 percent) than in global warming (36 percent). In August 2007, a Pew poll found that 68 percent of Americans believe that “angels and demons are active in the world.”

The story of the Nativity features one of these angels, Gabriel. His name means “the strength of God,” and he is often seen delivering messages of God’s kindness. The angel Gabriel is mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments, first to Daniel (Dan. 8:15–16) and later in the New Testament, predicting the births of John the Baptist and Jesus.

The passage tells us that the angel Gabriel was sent by God to Nazareth in the “sixth month,” referring to the pregnancy of Elizabeth (1:36). The angel had previously appeared to Zechariah, and now was sent on a second birth announcement mission to Mary. To this young girl, a virgin, the angel Gabriel appears and addresses her with great respect: “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you” (v. 28).

Like most humans receiving a heavenly visitor, Mary was “troubled” by the angel’s appearance. Gabriel repeated that she has found “favor” with God (v. 30). The fact that God has favored or chosen her should allay her fears. He then told Mary the reason for his visit: she will bear a son, in a supernatural way, and name Him Jesus. This will not be an ordinary baby, because His destiny will be to reign over the house of Jacob forever (vv. 31–33).

Jesus would not be the son of an earthly man, but the “Son of the Most High” (v. 32). The announcement of this baby certainly warranted an angelic messenger.

KEY VERSE He will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end. (Luke 1:33)

Apply the Word - Do you believe that angels are real? More than just a beautiful tree topper, these supernatural beings are present in the world today. Angels are not to be worshiped, but they are examples that there is more to this world than what we can physically see. Thank God for the presence of angels who help to accomplish the will of the Lord.

Luke 1:34–38

Gabriel: Sent for a Purpose

In the classic holiday movie, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, the angel Clarence is portrayed as a short, chubby man sent to save the life of a man who is down on his luck. The angel takes George Bailey on a journey to see what life would have been like if he had never been born. Clarence’s mission is a success as he shows George that every life has a purpose.

In the biblical Nativity story, the angel Gabriel is sent to tell a young girl that her life has a divine purpose. Imagine the shock of that ordinary girl from Nazareth to find herself confronted by one of God’s messengers. Although we will study Mary in more detail in a few days, her response here is significant. Like Zechariah, she questioned the angel’s words: “How will this be?” (v. 34).

The angel gave Mary both the practical and the heavenly explanation. The birth of Jesus would not happen the ordinary way. This child will be a “holy” offspring, the “Son of God” (v. 35).

The angel described this as a moment of “overshadowing,” where God’s divine purpose dominates over natural earthly processes. The birth of Jesus Christ, like the birth of John the Baptist, would be miraculous. We should not miss how God’s supernatural intervention permeates the Nativity. Things are not done in expected ways. Angelic beings continue to appear. God’s ways

supersede man's best and worst intentions.

Before the angel departed, Mary had graciously offered her life as the Lord's "servant" (v. 38) to God's purpose. Gabriel reminded her (and us): "For no word from God will ever fail" (v. 37). What had been promised would be fulfilled.

KEY VERSE The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. (Luke 1:35)

Apply the Word - "No word from God will ever fail" (v. 37). As you contemplate the supernatural aspects of the Nativity, consider the heavenly purpose of your own existence. What has God done through you so far? How will He use you in the future? Today, take time to commit each moment of your life to Him and rest on His promises.

Luke 1:39-45

As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. - Luke 1:44

TODAY IN THE WORD

Many mothers have stories to tell about their baby's behavior in the womb. Some report unborn children who seem to have regular "workout times." Many have seen the imprint of a baby's foot as he or she kicks (much to the excitement of older brothers and sisters). Some say they have played back-and-forth pushing games with their unborn infants, while others are sure they respond to family voices, familiar music, or even a flashlight held against the mother's abdomen.

Elizabeth's story tops them all! When her cousin Mary visited (with Jesus in her womb), the baby in her womb (John the Baptist) "leaped" in joyful recognition that the One for whom he would prepare the way was in that very room (vv. 41, 44). The baby's jump was a sign to both Mary and Elizabeth that they were in the middle of God's special plan.

Mary's visit included no fewer than four signs confirming the angel's message that Mary was carrying the Messiah. Gabriel had told her that Elizabeth was pregnant as a confirming sign of the truth of his words, so Mary's visit was an act of faith. She no doubt knew of her cousin's longstanding prayer for a child, and wanted to rejoice with her that it was coming to pass. She also counted on Elizabeth to reciprocate, for to whom could she turn amidst the cold stares and gossip? If her cousin was also miraculously pregnant, she was the one woman who could understand how Mary's world had been turned upside down.

The third and fourth signs were the filling of Elizabeth by the Holy Spirit and the prophetic message He gave her. She pronounced a general blessing on Mary and her unborn child, as well as a specific blessing on Mary's faith (v. 45). She talked about how and why her baby had leaped in the womb, and showed an understanding that her cousin's child was a superior being by respectfully referring to Him as "my Lord" (v. 43).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The story of Christmas revolves around the birth of a child. At this season, how can you celebrate the birth of children in your church and community? Perhaps you could provide support to new parents through meals and babysitting. Or you might consider volunteering at a crisis pregnancy center to support women who choose to keep their babies in the middle of challenging circumstances. These acts of service acknowledge the blessing and joy in the gift of children.

Luke 1:39-45

Mary: The Miracle Within

In *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* by Barbara Robinson, the ornery neighborhood tyrant, Imogene Herdman, steals the cherished role of Mary in the church pageant. Imogene plays her part with a mix of tenderness and aggression that ends up being a highlight of the pageant. At the end, the narrator says, "As far as I'm concerned, Mary is always going to look a lot like Imogene Herdman—sort of nervous and bewildered, but ready to clobber anyone who laid a hand on her baby."

Our opinions about Mary are often based on a mixture of Scripture and tradition. Today, we will begin our study with her visit to Elizabeth, just after she learned she was pregnant. Certainly Mary was probably "nervous and bewildered." Scripture doesn't tell us how old Mary was, but Jewish women were commonly betrothed as young as 12 or 13 years old, so Mary was probably in her teens.

Imagine all the questions she must have had: How would Joseph react? How would she tell her family? How would anyone believe her story? Mary traveled to the home of Elizabeth, her relative. Her visit occurred at the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, and the sight of Mary caused Elizabeth's baby to leap in her womb (v. 41). An amazing thing then happened: Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, prompting her to declare to Mary and her unborn child: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!"

God blessed Mary and Elizabeth with the companionship of one another when they were each experiencing miraculous pregnancies, and He blessed Elizabeth with the gift of the Holy Spirit. She becomes the first person in Scripture to offer praise to Jesus, even while He was still in the womb.

KEY VERSE Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! (Luke 1:42)

Apply the Word - Just as Elizabeth cried out in praise, take a moment today to sing quietly (or loudly!) in praise to your Savior. Praise Him for His love for us. Praise God for this miraculous gift of His Son. Praise Him for demonstrating humility in coming to this world as a vulnerable baby. Praise Him for sacrificing His Son for our sins and then raising Him from the dead.

Worship: Mary's Song

Read Luke 1:39–56

Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! Luke 1:42

Today we start a section on worshipful prayer in the New Testament by looking at one of the most beautiful and joyful passages in the entire Bible. Elizabeth and Mary were women whose lives were undergoing massive tumult as the result of divine activity. When these two cousins met, they worshiped God.

Mary departed quickly to visit Elizabeth, giving the impression that there had been time for little or no communication before she arrived in Judea. One can imagine Mary wondering how on earth she was going to tell her elderly cousin that she was going to bear the Messiah. It must have been an incredible blessing when, prompted by the leaping baby in her own belly, Elizabeth confirmed everything the angel Gabriel had told Mary.

Often called the Magnificat or Mary's Song, Mary's response to Elizabeth's greeting has been repeated in Christian worship for centuries. Mary's words echo Scripture, drawing deeply from the language and theology of the Psalms and providing a parallel to Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2. Mary's praise begins with her own experience, but quickly links this with God's character and actions in the past and then with His promises regarding the future. Instead of focusing on the child she was to bear, Mary focused on the Father who was working this miracle within her.

Mary's worshipful song is exemplary. We can see Mary's familiarity with Scripture and her spirit's joyful submission to God's will. She also demonstrates the posture of worship—looking beyond one's own experience to focus on the big picture of what God is doing. In this case, she looked beyond her own impending parenthood to the good news Jesus Himself would bear.

Apply the Word -Elizabeth's praise encouraged Mary, just as Mary's praise encouraged Elizabeth. Worshiping with others can be a faith-building experience. This can happen between two friends who spend time worshiping God together. Congregational singing of hymns and praise choruses is another excellent example of the benefits of public worship.

Luke 1:46-56

My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. - Luke 1:46-47

TODAY IN THE WORD

Don had a particular appreciation for the opportunity to attend church services. As a prisoner, he had to earn a three-hour release for good behavior and then be accompanied by an approved sponsor. During one service, there was a time for people to share testimonies of God's work. Don's hand immediately shot up, and his words were filled with praise to God for saving him, bringing him out of drug addiction, and even restoring his failed marriage. With his wife by his side, Don burst into "Amazing Grace," filling the church with praise to God.

In today's passage we find the same exuberant spirit of praise. Traditionally, this passage is referred to as the Magnificat, which in the Latin translation is the first word spoken by Mary. It corresponds to "glorifies" or "exalts" or "magnifies" in English translations (niv, nas, kjv) and gives us a sense of being summoned to worship.

This reaction was certainly evident in Mary's response to Elizabeth's words. She called God her "Savior" because she knew He would be the one to rescue her from a position of social shame and bring her to a position of spiritual honor (vv. 46-48).

Mary followed up this declaration with a psalm focusing not on her circumstances but on God's divine attributes (vv. 49-55). She put the main emphasis on His power—calling him the "Mighty One" and proclaiming how He performs mighty deeds, overthrows rulers, and humbles the proud.

Part and parcel of His power is His holiness, and neither of these exclude His mercy. All He does is framed by His goodness and

lovingkindness, both at a personal level (mindful of her humble state) and at a national level (helping Israel). We can always count on God to lift up the humble and fill the hungry!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If you've never memorized Mary's incredible response to Elizabeth's greeting before, this Christmas is the perfect time to do so. If committing the entire passage to memory seems too daunting, then select at least two of your favorite verses to learn. As you memorize and study, these verses will soak into your heart and mind and soul: "The Word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it" (Deut. 30:14).

Luke 1:46–51

Mary: The Blessed One

Musician Richard Wu, contributing to an album dedicated to the people of North Korea, composed a song titled "Magnificat." Explaining his inspiration, Wu writes, "My sociology professor in college used to remark about how revolutionary Mary's words were. She was just a young girl, and yet here she was proclaiming a great reversal and challenging the powers that be. Far from being demure and acquiescent, she demonstrated great insight into what was going on in her day. Mary's words convey a universal longing for the world to be made right."

The Magnificat is one of the most beautiful prayers in the Bible, and these amazing words were uttered by a young girl during one of the most challenging times in her life.

Mary had had some time to deal with the angel's news that she would bear the Son of God. She had traveled to her cousin Elizabeth's home, where she received confirmation that what the angel said was true. Rather than being frightened, Mary was overcome, humbled, and profoundly grateful.

Scholars note that numerous quotations from the Old Testament fill this prayer, demonstrating the extent that Mary knew the Scriptures. She began her prayer saying, "My soul glorifies the Lord" (v. 46). At the very center of her being, Mary was lifting up the Lord. She was giving all that she was and rejoicing in her calling.

Her words are prophetic, as she noted that generations would "call me blessed" (v. 48). Certainly Mary has become one of the most celebrated and revered figures from biblical history. But she put the emphasis where it belonged, on God Himself. She celebrated the fact that God, the "Mighty One" (v. 49), will change the world.

KEY VERSE The Mighty One has done great things for me. (Luke 1:49)

Apply the Word - What will God do through you? Are you a willing vessel for His mighty work? Sometimes we want God to do things for us. At the very least, we want Him to do great things that will prove our worth. Mary's prayer, the Magnificat, suggests just the opposite. She would be blessed when God showed His mighty hand through her life.

Luke 1:46–55

Probably every mother has a story of how she realized that she was going to have a child. Rebecca knew when she felt dizzy at the park; Lillian knew when the nausea hit; Stacy knew when the social worker called with the news that the birth mother had selected her to adopt her daughter. But imagine if an angel told you that you would miraculously conceive, your baby would be the long-awaited Davidic king, and your cousin affirmed this revelation through blessing (Luke 1:26–45)! This was Mary's experience, and today's reading is her response to the remarkable news.

The famous title of Mary's Song, Magnificat, originates from the first word of the Latin version of this passage: magnify. "My soul magnifies the Lord!" Mary sings. Her response is praise, and the remainder of her song explains why (vv. 47–55).

Notice throughout Mary's song, the primary actor is God. For who He is and what He does, the Lord is worthy of praise. Mary rehearses God's mercy to her personally (vv. 48–49). She highlights the contrast: the Mighty One, holy and exalted, is mindful of one inconsequential young woman. God's activity reverses her situation; Mary goes from humble servant to blessed forever by all generations.

Verse 50 connects the two sections of her song, and then Mary shifts to proclaim God's mercy to Abraham's descendants (vv. 51–55). "Mighty deeds" and "outstretched arm" echo back to God's rescue of His people out of Egypt. Mary recognizes God as deliverer, and she knows the news of her baby is news of God's deliverance. God's redemption turns things upside down. Notice what happens to the proud, the rulers, and the rich compared to the humble and the hungry (vv. 51–53). The end of Mary's song ties Gabriel's announcement to God's ancient covenant with Abraham and his descendants. God will be faithful to His promises; He will be merciful (vv. 54–55). Mary understands that the birth of her baby Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises of redemption. Jesus

is the new king we read about yesterday.

Apply the Word - The structure of verses 52 and 53 draws our attention to them. God's action toward the rulers and rich is mentioned first and last, with His mercy toward the humble and hungry announced in the middle. In Jesus, God is transforming people and social structures that exalt self-absorption and wealth to the exclusion and at the expense of the poor. God humbles the proud to reveal their need of Him and to soften their hearts toward others. Allow God to humble you so that He can then fill you with good things.

Luke 1:51–56

Mary: Power of the Almighty

Matt and Lana Shaw, graduates of Moody Bible Institute, saw the overwhelming needs of the homeless in Charlotte, North Carolina, and decided to help. Following the example of Matt's parents who had started a similar ministry in the Philippines, they founded Speak Up magazine, a street paper that "gives a voice to those without one." The magazine is sold by homeless people who work as vendors. "We felt like we needed to speak up for people who can't speak up for themselves," Matt said.

In this second half of her prayer, "The Magnificat," Mary turned the attention away from herself and toward the power of God, who, in His great mercy, gives a voice to those without one. Mary's prayer is a study of these types of contrasts. God is portrayed as helping the weak, the humble, and the hungry, and crushing those who are rich and powerful.

Mary recognized that in comparison to the eternal nature and absolute power of the Almighty, her earthly role is insignificant. Martin Luther, writing on the Magnificat, said, "The eyes of the world and of men . . . look only above them." He contrasted this with God who "looks into the depths with their need and misery and is nigh unto all that are in the depths."

In her vulnerability, Mary noted the power of the Lord. "He has performed mighty deeds with his arm" (v. 51). This is taken from Psalm 98:1. God is also powerful, but also merciful. He is mighty, but gentle. The chapter notes that Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months, leaving before the birth of John the Baptist. Mary must have been encouraged by her time with Elizabeth, reminded of the power of God and His ability to work in even those impossible circumstances.

KEY VERSE He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent away the rich empty. (Luke 1:53)

Apply the Word - Consider how you can lift up the humble in a way that honors God. Can you support the work of an organization that helps those in need? Can you help someone who is struggling this month? During this Christmas season, remember the words of Mary as she reveals the heart of God, not with the mighty, but with the lowly and the humble.

Luke 1:57–64

Elizabeth: Naming Her Son

One couple from Illinois, unable to decide on a name for their baby, set up a Facebook poll. People from as far away as New Zealand and Iceland voted on the names Madelyn, McKenna, Emily, and Addilyne. On January 3, the couple named their baby girl Madelyn, which had won with more than 1,300 votes.

Today's passage opens with the momentous occasion of a child's birth: "It was time for Elizabeth to have her baby" (v. 57). What a time of incredible rejoicing for the friends and relatives of the happy couple! This woman was advanced in years, and the text hints that she was greatly loved in her community. And now she had at last given birth to a healthy child. Surely this was a sign of God's "great mercy" (v. 58).

They gathered to circumcise the baby boy on the eighth day, and the extended family planned to name him "Zechariah" like his father. It would follow the tradition in which the oldest son was given the name of the father.

Zechariah, still mute, relied on Elizabeth to deliver the news of their alternative name. She told the gathering, "He is to be called John" (v. 60). The guests turned to Zechariah, who was now communicating by tablet. They asked him for confirmation of Elizabeth's strange pronouncement. Zechariah, upholding his wife's declaration and God's wishes, wrote back the words: "His name is John" (v. 63).

Scripture tells us that immediately following this act of faithful obedience, Zechariah regained his speech and began praising God. Imagine the wonderful party that followed, with friends and relatives, his wife and new baby, able to express his thanks to God for this amazing gift!

KEY VERSE Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue set free, and he began to speak, praising God. (Luke 1:64)

Apply the Word We live in a world of constant communication. Emails, texts, and phone calls all force our minds to be so busy that

we neglect to focus on God. The time of silence in Zechariah's life allowed him to absorb what God had to say. Take a "silence" break today—even for ten minutes—to allow yourself to focus on what the Word of God is saying to you.

Luke 1:57-79

You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him. - Luke 1:76

TODAY IN THE WORD

The traditional spiritual, "Go Tell It on the Mountain," is also a Christmas carol. The chorus proclaims: "Go, tell it on the mountain, Over the hills and everywhere; Go, tell it on the mountain That Jesus Christ is born!" The song's first two verses focus on the shepherds' role in the Nativity story, while the third succinctly summarizes the redemptive purposes of Jesus' life: "Down in a lowly manger, the humble Christ was born, and brought us God's salvation that blessed Christmas morn."

John the Baptist's miraculous birth is another memorable aspect of the Christmas story—an act of mercy (v. 58) within a larger story of mercy. Zechariah had had nine months to reflect (silently!) on his experience in the temple. He received confirmations from both his wife and Mary that the angel's words were true. He'd made the choice to obey, break with tradition, and name the baby "John" (v. 13). But since he couldn't speak, the gutsy duty of interrupting the rabbi to say so fell to Elizabeth. As soon as Zechariah affirmed their decision in writing, his punishment of silence ended and his power of speech was restored (vv. 63-64). From the participants' perspective, this confirmed that the child was destined by God for great things (vv. 65-66). From Zechariah's perspective, he overflowed with thankfulness that God is a God of second chances! No doubt Mary's faith was also boosted. Though she doesn't appear in today's narrative, she might have been present for the occasion, since she visited Elizabeth in the sixth month of her cousin's pregnancy and stayed for three months (vv. 26, 56).

Zechariah's Spirit-filled praise began in the context of God's covenant faithfulness and redemptive purposes (vv. 67-75), which would become the life-themes of his newborn son, John. He prophesied that the boy would become a prophet, preach a message of repentance and forgiveness, and prepare the way for the Lord (vv. 76-79).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Earlier this month, we mentioned the "musical treasures of Christmas" (Dec. 5). Today, we suggest that you discover a new treasure or two, by exploring Christmas music that is brand-new to you. Those who prefer up-tempo praise music might enjoy Christmas Offerings, a recent album by Third Day (2006), while more classically minded enthusiasts should check out the historical An American Christmas, a collection of works performed by the Boston Camerata, directed by Joel Cohen (1993).

Luke 1:57–80

Last year saw the 500th anniversary of the first decorated Christmas tree. In 1510, a fir tree was placed in a public marketplace in Riga, Latvia, and decorated with paper roses by local merchants in order to honor the birth of Christ. The idea of decorating Christmas trees caught on—ornaments included apples, nuts, cookies, colorful paper, and lighted candles—and eventually German settlers brought this holiday custom to the United States. Colored glass balls were popular ornaments at the end of the nineteenth century, with electric lights soon following. The lighting of the first White House Christmas tree took place in 1923.

Luke continued his account of the first Christmas in today's reading by narrating the birth of John the Baptist. From a human perspective, this was a joyful occasion. Elizabeth knew that God had blessed her and Zechariah and answered their prayers for a child. Her relatives and neighbors shared in the joy and praised the Lord with them for this miracle baby. From God's perspective, though, much more was going on, and He reminded everyone of this during the circumcision and naming ceremony. The baby's name itself, John, contradicted expectations because it was not a traditional family name. And when Zechariah spoke for the first time in nine months to affirm that they would be obeying God and naming the child John, the onlookers were doubly astonished.

What did it all mean? One point here is that God's plans are a sure thing. No sooner has Gabriel made the announcements in Luke than we see them coming to pass. Another point is that the time has come. After so many prophecies and centuries of waiting, the time has at last arrived in God's plan for the advent of the Messiah.

At a personal level, the transformation in Zechariah's heart foreshadowed the work God would do and has been doing, in countless hearts through salvation in Christ. Verses 67 through 79, known as the Benedictus, show clearly that Zechariah had come to trust not only in the angel's words concerning baby John, but to trust more deeply in God's covenant faithfulness.

Apply the Word - God is in the business of changing lives. Sometimes the change is lightning—quick; sometimes, as in Zechariah's case, it takes more time. The result is always a deepened faith and a hunger for the glory of God. The question becomes, then, in what ways is God transforming your heart? He loves you no less than He loved Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, and Joseph. And though

we stand at a distance in time from the Christmas story, we are equally in need of the Savior.

Luke 1:64–75

John the Baptist: A Certain Future

William Shakespeare wrote: “If you can look into the seeds of time, / And tell which grain will grow and which will not, / Speak.” The Nativity story has two sets of parents who could look ahead into the future and predict what would happen with their children: Zechariah and Elizabeth (on whom we focus in today’s passage) and Joseph and Mary. Both sets of parents were given a child through miraculous, supernatural means. Both couples were told what to name their child. And both couples were told the future role for their child. Imagine a child growing in your womb and already knowing the major role he would play in the salvation of the world!

As soon as Zechariah declared the name of his son, John, his tongue was freed and he began to praise God. Their friends and neighbors were filled with awe, and word of John’s miraculous birth spread throughout the country. We are told it was being talked about throughout Judea—and people were asking, “What then is this child going to be?” (v. 66). They recognized that this was a miraculous birth and a special child with a future ordained by God.

After years of praying to have a child, Zechariah now prayed for a blessing for his special son. He recognized that God had indeed blessed His people with redemption. He would raise up the “horn of salvation” (v. 69), a symbol of power.

This blessing is linked to another great birth story: the promise given to Abraham (v. 73; see Genesis 22). Through this child, and soon another, God’s people would be delivered from their enemies to “serve him without fear” (v. 74).

KEY VERSE “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him. (Luke 1:66)

Apply the Word - God had great plans for these two babies: one to prepare the way for the Messiah and the other to atone for the sins of the world. Have you considered that our God is omniscient? He knows the beginning and the end. He holds your future in His hand—as well as the futures of those you love. Ask God today to help you trust that He is in control.

Luke 1:76–80

John the Baptist: Light in the Darkness

Futuristic novels often portray the end of the world as a time of darkness and despair. In Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road*, a father and son wander the landscape of a postapocalyptic nation that has been burned and destroyed beyond recognition. They struggle to stay alive in the midst of oppressive darkness. There is no light, no sun, and no hope.

The words of Zechariah as he spoke of the future of his son, John the Baptist, portray this tiny child as a deliverer of light to a dark world. Zechariah continued his prayer of dedication: “And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High” (v. 76). In the Old Testament, prophets were chosen by God to deliver a message to His people. This message was sometimes welcome, but most often not. A prophet spoke truth—and sometimes people were unwilling or unable to hear.

John would be given a special task: to prepare the way of the Lord—to go before Jesus and prepare people for the Messiah. He would give people “the knowledge of salvation” (v. 77). He would baptize and teach the forgiveness of sins.

This prayer also shows a different side of God, which is fully exemplified in the life of Jesus Christ. God’s love and mercy are compared to a light shining into a dark world. A lovely comparison is made to a sunrise. The birth of Jesus is like the “rising sun” (v. 78).

The end of this chapter quickly summarizes the childhood of John the Baptist, this baby whose life’s work was predicted on the day of his circumcision. He would grow strong in spirit, live in the desert, and then begin a public ministry in Israel: preparing the way of the Lord.

KEY VERSE To shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death. (Luke 1:79)

Apply the Word - Have you ever gotten up early to see a sunrise? If you are able, and if the winter sky is not too dark, try to do that in the next few days. Watching the sunrise from a few pastel rays into a full and burning globe reveals an image of God’s glory. God’s gift to us this season, the birth of His Son, was like the sunrise over a darkened, hopeless world.

LUKE 2

Luke 2:1-5

He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. - Luke 2:5

TODAY IN THE WORD

In a time of tumbling stock markets and wars in far-off lands, some grow nostalgic for the “good old days.” We might even tend to think of the original Christmas as a happy event that occurred in a simpler time and place. But geopolitical power struggles, economic hardships, ethnic conflicts, and other features of our “modern” world were also very much a part of the world into which Jesus was born. In his poem, “Two Christmas Cards,” American poet Robinson Jeffers put it this way: “Caesar and Herod shared the world / Sorrow over Bethlehem lay, / Iron the empire, brutal the time / Dark was that first Christmas day.”

As today's reading reminds us, a decree of the Roman Empire was part of the Christmas story, and an essential component of God's unfolding, sovereign plan. The Gentile world of bureaucracy and empire also had its part to play—not everything was angels and miracles and psalms of praise. But, in a way, these circumstances are profoundly comforting: ordinary events are ordained by God just as extraordinary ones are. He is always at work, whether He writes the message in the sky or not.

Caesar Augustus ruled from 31 b.c. to a.d. 14, a time regarded as a golden age for Rome. He probably ordered the census for the purposes of collecting taxes, determining eligibility for military service (not including Jews), and quantifying the scope of his empire and achievements. Quirinius served two terms as governor, 6-4 b.c. and a.d. 6-9, which is why many scholars believe the actual date of Jesus birth was around 4 b.c.

The census's requirement of hometown registration compelled Mary and Joseph to leave Nazareth and go to Bethlehem. Even on the verge of having a child, they couldn't say “no” to the Roman Empire! Through the tedium of obeying a census order, God made sure that the prophecy of Micah 5:2 would be fulfilled.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Sometimes we experience the work of God in our lives as clearly as trumpets blasting and as grandly as angels singing. Other times, it might be unclear how God is working in our circumstances. Our passage today encourages us that even as we go about our daily lives, fulfilling our responsibilities, God is working. Are there points where you can look back and see God's hand in retrospect? Thank Him for His unfailing work, and use your reflection on those moments as encouragement to remain faithful.

Luke 2:1–20

On October 30, 2010, shoppers at Macy's in downtown Philadelphia enjoyed a “Random Act of Culture” sponsored by the Knight Foundation. In honor of National Opera Week, local organizers brought over 650 singers to the department store. At a prearranged signal they surprised everyone by bursting into the “Hallelujah Chorus” from Handel's Messiah. They were accompanied by the famous Wanamaker Organ, the largest pipe organ in the world. Shoppers consumed with buying things were suddenly reminded of deeper truths.

It must have been similar for the shepherds. One minute, they were out in the fields taking care of sheep, just doing their jobs; the next minute, they were experiencing an angelic host singing the original “Hallelujah Chorus”! The fact that they were favored with this dazzling announcement of the birth of the Son of God is inexplicable from a human point of view. Why them? They weren't rich, they weren't educated, they weren't powerful—they weren't even “religious.” What they did have was faith. After the angels had gone, the shepherds responded obediently and immediately to what they had been told, found the baby, and spread the good news. This episode in Luke reflects the writer's emphasis on God's love for the poor and socially marginalized—the gospel is truly for everyone!

The shepherds weren't the only participants in the drama. The angels were clearly eager to deliver the most incredible news of all time to these oblivious humans. No doubt they could hardly comprehend the union of God and man who lay there in the manger that night, but they knew it was world-changing. Mary and Joseph were also key actors on God's stage, and their simple faithfulness should not be underestimated. Even the Roman government played an unwitting part, decreeing a census that fit right into God's sovereign plan and helping to fulfill the prophecy of a Bethlehem birth.

What was it all for? “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men” (v. 14). This peace is first and foremost peace with God (Rom. 5:1–2).

Apply the Word Thanks to the Internet, you, too, can share in the joy of seeing the “Hallelujah Chorus” at Macy's. Video of the event in today's illustration has proved immensely popular online. To watch (and perhaps even sing along), go to www.youtube.com and search for Macy's Philadelphia Hallelujah Chorus. As we approach the celebration of Easter and the commemoration of Jesus' death and resurrection, this beautiful music is particularly appropriate.

Luke 2:1-20

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. - Luke 1:68

TODAY IN THE WORD

One of the best parts of the Advent season is the rich legacy of Christmas carols. Consider the following line from a popular carol: “O little town of Bethlehem! How still we see thee lie . . . Yet in thy dark street shineth, the everlasting light; The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

The angel expresses a similar expectation in verse 10. Most of us are probably familiar with this verse, but it’s worth reminding ourselves why exactly this is good news—after all, many people today don’t believe that they need a savior.

The entire Bible is the single story of human beings lost in rebellion against their Creator and of that Creator’s great love for His people. The angel’s good news is that the birth of Jesus is God’s answer to the desperate condition of every human being. God’s good news of salvation is the hope of all peoples and all tribes, regardless of where they are located or what language they speak. As the angel proclaims, this good news is “for all the people.”

Our study this month will trace the wisdom of God’s good news for all the nations, beginning with humanity’s fall and ending with ceaseless worship of the multitude before His eternal throne. We will look at key passages that show the depth and glory of God’s love for humanity, which is fully expressed in Jesus Christ. In our study, we’ll see that even though God often works through one person, such as Abraham, or one nation, such as Israel, His offer of salvation has always been intended for all the peoples of the world.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

In Luke 2:11, we find the three titles of Jesus all together: He is the Savior, the Christ, and the Lord. Using a Bible dictionary or a concordance, look up each of these titles and write out a brief definition of each. Take note especially of what these titles meant in the Old Testament and how they are fulfilled in Jesus. Then take some time to reflect on what each means for you personally. What has Jesus saved you from? How is Jesus Lord in your life?

Luke 2:6-7

She gave birth to her firstborn, a son. - Luke 2:7

TODAY IN THE WORD

In February of this year, a tornado ripped apart a home in Tennessee and killed a woman named Kerri. She was one of 56 people who perished in a series of deadly twisters spread across five states. Everyone assumed her son, 11-month-old Kyson, had died as well. But a firefighter searching the wreckage found the boy, who he thought at first was a doll, alive amidst the debris. He had been thrown a hundred yards from the house and was not located until two hours after the storm had passed. Amazingly, he had only minor injuries. “He’s just a miracle,” his grandfather said.

Kyson was truly a miracle baby—twice given the gift of life by God. The greatest miracle baby in all of history was the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Our month’s study has now brought us to the hinge of history, the birth of God Incarnate. The world was mostly oblivious to the coming of Christ, announced by angels, fulfilling centuries’ worth of promises and covenants.

The birth narrative does not pretend otherwise. The story is told simply, in just two verses of straightforward prose, showing that significance and power need not be heralded by the literary equivalent of trumpets and drums.

The humble circumstances of Jesus’ birth included parents under a cloud of shame and suspicion; a road trip under difficult circumstances; the simplest possible baby outfit, “swaddling clothes” (kiv); an animal feeding trough as a makeshift bassinet; and since there was “no room for them in the inn,” a stable as the “labor and delivery ward.”

The Son of God as a baby in a manger is the definition of irony. Whereas worldly leaders fly first class, drive high-status cars, wear expensive suits, and enjoy other perks of power, Jesus humbled Himself in obedience to the Father and became a man (Phil. 2:5-8). The physical circumstances of His birth reflected the spiritual virtues by which He would live.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

You might have been born in a log cabin or in a top-flight hospital. Perhaps your family was poor or displaced, or maybe your parents were among the elite. None of us can change the circumstances of our birth, but we can follow in the example of Christ in our lives. We can all emulate His humility, concern for others, and desire to do the will of the Father. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can follow Jesus to the glory of God. There’s no better way to celebrate Christmas than to make this commitment today.

Luke 2:1–3; Matthew 22:15–22

Caesar Augustus: Giving the Decree

Caesar Augustus was the first emperor of the Roman Empire. He was born in 63 b.c. and died in a.d. 14, ruling Rome as emperor for 45 years. He was the grandnephew of Julius Caesar and known for the peace and prosperity he brought to the Roman Empire.

Caesar Augustus allowed the Jews to retain their religion, but Rome was still the political authority. Unknowingly setting the stage for the Christmas pageant, the emperor issued a decree that a census be taken. This command is why Joseph and his pregnant wife, Mary, left home and traveled to his ancestral home of Bethlehem (vv. 3–4). Although he didn't know it, Caesar Augustus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecy found in Micah 5:2, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel." Because of the decree given by Caesar and carried out by government officials like Quirinius, Jesus was born in Bethlehem and perfectly fulfilled the prophecy recorded in Micah.

Interestingly, while Caesar Augustus was the most important person in the world at the time, in the story of the Nativity he is a secondary player at most. He is in the background, part of the stage props. Augustus may have brought peace to the Roman Empire, but the tiny baby to be born would bring eternal peace with God to the whole world. Augustus would eventually pass into the pages of history, while Jesus is the focal point of all history.

While Caesar wanted Joseph and Mary to travel the long journey to Bethlehem for political reasons, God used the ruler's actions for His own divine reason: to transport the couple to the birthplace of His Son.

KEY VERSE In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (Luke 2:1)

Apply the Word - Many people get stressed about politics. While we should pray for our leaders and participate as citizens of our given countries, we must also remember that our true citizenship is of another country. God can and will work in our lives in ways that go far beyond any type of governmental control. Praise God today for His divine and eternal leadership.

Luke 2:4–7

Innkeeper: No Room for Jesus

The word motel comes from two words, motor and hotel. As the U.S. highway system expanded, more motels opened to offer clean beds and hot showers for travelers who needed a break from the road.

Many a traveler had the experience of pulling into a motel parking lot late at night, only to find the blinking sign: "No Vacancy." The predicament for Mary and Joseph was similar, but even more dire. They were weary from their hundred-mile journey, desperate for a place to rest—and Mary was about to give birth.

Although an innkeeper is not specifically mentioned in the scriptural account, he is often a fixture in pageants. He is the one who turns away Joseph's request for a place to stay and then offers his stable. The word inn in several Bible translations was probably not like our concept of a motel. It probably was more like a guesthouse or guest room in the home of a distant relative. Since the census decree had brought many people into Bethlehem, most homes there were likely already filled to capacity with visitors and extended family.

Though a specific innkeeper is not referenced in the Gospels, we do know that conventional lodging was not available for Mary and Joseph, and they found themselves camping in a barn when Mary gave birth to Jesus. Mary "wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger" (v. 7). A manger was a feeding trough for animals, typically kept in a stable or stall. An innkeeper or relative did not provide a comfortable bed and warm meal for Mary, Joseph, and the new baby Jesus. But God still provided for their needs, with shelter and even a protected place for the newborn Son to sleep.

KEY VERSE She gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger. (Luke 2:7)

Apply the Word - As you prepare for Christmas, consider the humble and simple beginnings of our Savior. He did not have grand preparations or a luxurious nursery. He was born in a stable, and placed in a simple manger. Is there room in your holiday celebration for Jesus? Do not let these busy days push the real reason for Christmas from your heart and home.

Luke 2:1-20

She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger. - Luke 2:7

TODAY IN THE WORD

Tradition holds that it was an underground cave that hosted Jesus' birth into the world. The supposed spot is marked and preserved beneath the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Where the manger is believed to have rested, an altar now stands commemorating

the significance of His miraculous birth. Gilded decor now surrounds the site, yet the exact location of Christ's birth remains unclear. The text doesn't mention a cave or even the type of place where it happened—but we do know the infant Jesus was placed in a manger.

A feeding trough, a bed of hay, some wooden or stone bin devised for use with livestock—it possibly could have been located either within or outside a house rather than a cave or inn, but that was the bed of the King of kings. That was the only place Mary could choose to lay her baby to rest. But it wasn't Mary and Joseph alone who chose; God the Father selected an animal's manger to be the first bed His Son would ever sleep in. Regardless of the other details, we know that for sure.

The manger was the specific feature the angel gave the shepherds to identify the resting place of the Messiah, which introduces another connection between animals and Jesus' birth. The shepherds hurried off to find the new family. It is significant that the first announcement of the birth of God's Son would greet the ears of people whose calling in life was to tend sheep (see John 10).

These circumstances were low and meager—but for the King of heaven, wouldn't anything on earth pale in comparison to His former glory? And there's another perspective as well. By choosing these otherwise humble lodgings and greeters, God wasn't denigrating His Son—He was bringing significance to the lowly. The manger had a new purpose: giving rest to Jesus and identifying Him as the Christ! And the shepherds had a profound role: they announced the arrival of their Savior, which brought amazement to those who heard and glory to God in the highest (vv. 18, 20). That was the reason Jesus arrived in the first place, to redeem a fallen world to God's glory.

APPLY THE WORD

Animals are not the stars of this story, but we should remember that the same is true of us. The animals that ate from that manger, the shepherds standing out in that field, they weren't the least bit glorious. But Jesus included them, and He includes us, in His story of redemption. Take this moment to recognize that Jesus is the Lord of all creation and should be the center of our attention. Praise and glorify Him today!

Luke 2:8-14

Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. - Luke 2:11

TODAY IN THE WORD

Christian History & Biography reports that tens of thousands of Japanese are coming to Christ through the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. This is primarily thanks to organist and conductor Masaaki Suzuki. When he performs the St. Matthew Passion during Holy Week, the concerts are sold out, and afterwards the stage is crowded with people asking about the messages in Bach's music. The messages are thoroughly biblical, so much so that Bach's work was once called "the fifth Gospel." In the words of one Japanese musician who converted to Christianity: "When I play a fugue, I can feel Bach talking to God." Bach, a devout believer, would no doubt rejoice to know that centuries later his music is still spreading the good news of the gospel.

On the night of Jesus' birth, an angel appeared to shepherds. Why shepherds? Perhaps they fit with the humble circumstances of His birth; perhaps God wanted to point back to King David, who began as a shepherd; or perhaps He wanted to point forward, to the arrival of the Good Shepherd and the Lamb of God. In any case, the shepherds responded to the angel as others had, with both awe and terror. "Do not be afraid," the angel told them, then he proclaimed "good news of great joy"—the gospel—"that will be for all the people"—universal in scope. "Today in the town of David"—prophecy fulfillment alert!—"a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord"—the Messiah, the Anointed One (vv. 10-12).

Then the skies exploded in praise! The watching hosts of heaven could hold back no longer, appearing suddenly in a blaze of light and belting out, "Gloria in excelsis deo" (Latin), or "Glory to God in the highest" (English).

The shepherds experienced the most terrifying and exhilarating moment of their lives—yet they also heard, "and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests" (vv. 13-14).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

A great way to close your personal devotion time today would be to sing a favorite Christmas hymn such as "Joy to the World." You might also plan to gather others for a time of singing beloved Christmas songs such as "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" and "Silent Night." You might not be the most accomplished musician, but you can still bless others—perhaps those who are in the hospital or nursing home—with Christmas music. Let your soul "rejoice in the Lord and delight in his salvation" (Ps. 35:9).

Luke 2:8–12

The Shepherds: Attentive Audience

The announcement of Christ's birth to the shepherds is often pictured as idyllic and quiet. The reality of a shepherd's daily life, however, was probably far different. Ralph Gower, in his book *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times*, said that sheep needed constant protection. Lions and bears and other wild animals could easily threaten the flock. He notes that Amos (3:12) tells the story of a shepherd trying to remove his sheep from a lion's mouth. The shepherd often had to fight back against predators who might threaten his sheep and his livelihood.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that in the same region where Christ was being born, some shepherds were guarding their flocks through the darkness of night (2:8). Their evening was interrupted, not by a vicious lion, but by the angel of the Lord. The sight of the angel was bright and glorious, and the shepherds' first reaction was not excitement or joy but fear (v. 9).

The angel was quick to reassure the shepherds. They were told that they did not need to be frightened, because this message was full of joy. It would impact not only their lives, but also the lives of "all the people" (v. 10).

The angel then issued a heavenly birth announcement. The shepherds were told that the Messiah had been born! This was not an ordinary baby, but rather the Savior that countless generations had longed to see. No wonder the shepherds were willing to leave their sheep, and we should not miss the significance here. They were leaving their livelihood unguarded against thieves and predators for the opportunity to see the Messiah. The word from the angel was true: the shepherds found the infant Jesus swaddled and placed in a manger.

KEY VERSE Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. (Luke 2:10)

Apply the Word - Shepherds were working men, with hours of exhausting work; the announcement of Jesus' birth came first to them. They didn't rank high on society's scale, but God valued them enough to invite them to see the Messiah. How do you value the people around you? Resolve to invite anyone, no matter where they are on society's scale, to meet and know the Savior.

Luke 2:13–20

The Shepherds: Baby's First Visitors

Many cultures have traditions to celebrate the arrival of a baby. In the United States, some display a wooden cut-out stork on their front lawn. Others send out engraved announcements featuring the photo, weight, and other details of the new arrival. Baby Jesus had his birth announced by a great company of angels (2:13).

The appearance of the heavenly beings comes directly following the angel's announcement. We are told that "a great company of the heavenly host" was praising God. This supernatural birth brought honor and glory to God. Notice that verse 14, which states, "on whom his favor rests," foreshadows the words of God the Father at Jesus' baptism in Luke 3:22. When Jesus was baptized, the heavens opened for the Holy Spirit and the voice of God. In that moment, the Father said: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." The Trinity was expressed in that moment, bearing witness to the favor on Jesus.

When the angels disappeared from their heavenly choir, the shepherds had no doubt about what to do next. They immediately turned to one another, not to rationalize away the appearance, but to follow the angel's command to go to Bethlehem. They wanted to see for themselves what the heavenly host had declared to be true. They went to Bethlehem in a hurry (v. 16) and found Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus.

The shepherds did not come bearing gifts. Instead, they revealed to the young couple the news of the divine announcement, no doubt again confirming the reality of the baby's identity. They did not keep this wonderful news to themselves, but "spread the word" about the birth of the Savior (vv. 17, 20).

KEY VERSE - Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests. (Luke 2:14)

Apply the Word - The Christmas story is about good news, news so exciting that it was announced by angels and shared by shepherds. Pray today that God will use this holiday season to allow you the opportunity to share the good news of Jesus Christ. The miraculous nature of His birth and life are too wonderful to keep to yourself.

Luke 2:15-20

They spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child. - Luke 2:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

Albert Pujols of the St. Louis Cardinals is one of baseball's superstars, a regular All-Star and MVP contender. He's also a Christian who wants his light to shine for Jesus. He points to the sky as he circles the bases after home runs, giving the credit to God. Says Pujols: God is "using me by giving me this platform so I can honor Him and get to know more people and just share the gospel."

Though public speaking makes him nervous, he shares his testimony before large crowds. Fans idolize him, but he responds: "It's not about Albert Pujols, it's about Jesus Christ."

The shepherds in the Christmas story also understood that their experience was not just for their own spiritual enrichment. Good news should be shared! Following the original "Hallelujah Chorus" by the angels in yesterday's reading, the shepherds did as they were told and went to look for the child (v. 15). With God's help, they found the baby in the manger, just as they'd been told (v. 16).

They no doubt exchanged stories with Mary and Joseph, enhancing their understanding of what it all meant. Then they "spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed" (vv. 17-18).

But did these people believe? Did they seek out the child for themselves? Did they want to hear the story firsthand from Mary and Joseph? Did they search the Scriptures for relevant prophecies? We don't know. We're told only that Mary attentively "treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart," again seeing the hand of God in her newborn son's life (v. 19).

In the end, the shepherds did what the angels did—glorify and praise the Lord (v. 20). They had found exactly what God had said they would find. This boosted their faith that the baby was who they had been told—the Savior. He was all they had been promised—peace and joy.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The shepherds knew what to do with good news—they shared it! Our mandate is the same: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15). Share the gospel with a neighbor, invite someone to an evangelistic event at your church, or pray for an encounter with someone eager to discuss spiritual things. Many people are lonely and seeking for meaning during the Christmas season. Ask God to prepare hearts to be receptive, and then share the true joy and peace found in the person and work of Jesus.

Luke 2:21–40

Some people say that "timing is everything." But in most instances our "good timing" is accidental. We happen to fill out a job application on the same day that someone quits. We go somewhere on a whim and meet a person in a chance encounter who becomes a lifelong friend or a spouse. We happen to be "in the right place at the right time"—but not because we had planned it. God is at work behind the scenes, rolling out the details of His grand design for our lives. But to us the whole thing feels like a coincidence.

Today's passage is full of meetings that look like chance encounters but are actually divine appointments. Eight days after Christ's birth, Mary and Joseph had Jesus circumcised and gave Him the name that the angel had commanded. Thirty-three days after that they traveled to Jerusalem to consecrate Him to the Lord and make an offering for Mary's purification.

The timing of Jesus' circumcision was determined by the Law of Moses (Lev. 12:3). The Law also required that the firstborn male of every family be consecrated to God (Ex. 13:2, 12). This act of consecration involved offering a sacrifice. The ordinary purification offering was a year-old lamb and a pigeon or a dove. Those who could not afford it were allowed to offer two pigeons or two doves instead. The fact that Luke 2:24 mentions "a pair of doves or two young pigeons" indicates the economic status of Joseph and Mary.

While visiting the temple, Joseph and Mary met a man called Simeon. Although he is not explicitly called a prophet in the text, Simeon played a prophetic role in these events. He was "righteous and devout" and had been told by Holy Spirit that he would see the Messiah (vv. 25–27). He was "moved by the Spirit" to visit the temple just in time to encounter Joseph and Mary. His benediction was further confirmation for Joseph and Mary of what God had done in their lives. They also met the prophetess Anna who "spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Israel" (Luke 2:38).

Apply the Word

We do not need to be anxious about placing ourselves in the right place at the right time. We need to trust in God's perfect timing and respond to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Often we cannot discern the details of God's plan in advance. Only afterward, as God brings seemingly random circumstances together in a meaningful way, it becomes clear. If you struggle to make sense of events in your life now, remain faithful and trust that one day God will reveal His work to you.

Luke 2:21-24 Matthew 2:13-23;

TODAY IN THE WORD

The story is told of a great military commander who sat by an evening fire with several of his officers to discuss the day's battle. He asked the officers, ""Who did the best today on the field of battle?"" One by one, the men told of soldiers who had fought bravely and risked their lives for their comrades.

The commander heard them out, then said, ""No, I fear you are all mistaken."" He told of a soldier who, just as he raised his arm to strike an enemy, heard the trumpet sound retreat. Instantly, he dropped his arm without striking and retreated, an act the commander called ""perfect and ready obedience to the will of his general.""

Today's reading demonstrates that Joseph and Mary obeyed God in the same spirit of promptness and submission. The story of Jesus' circumcision and Mary's purification in Luke 2 precedes the family's flight into Egypt, possibly by a number of months. But both accounts reveal Jesus' parents' perfect and ready obedience to the will and direction of God.

Apparently, Jesus was circumcised in Bethlehem on the eighth day after His birth, in obedience to the Law (Lev. 12:3). Then, in accordance with the Law, Mary remained ceremonially ""unclean"" for an additional thirty-three days. At the end of that time, she and Joseph traveled to Jerusalem to present the prescribed sacrifice (Lev. 12:6-8). Since the couple offered doves or pigeons rather than a lamb, we know that they were poor.

Joseph's obedience to the angelic warnings was much more dramatic than his obedience to the Law. Fleeing to Egypt must have been the last thing on his mind. But he and Mary did exactly that, just because God said to!

We know that more happened here in God's plan than merely the holy family's avoiding danger. Matthew tells us that the flight fulfilled God's prophetic word (Matt. 2:15; Hosea 11:1). By identifying Jesus with Israel, God was validating His Son's identity as Israel's Messiah and calling the nation to identify with Him.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Here's a second way you can make good use of these ""in between"" days so as to finish 1996 well.

If you're like most people, you probably didn't have enough time to visit with everyone during the holidays. Why not invite some of those people over for an informal time of fellowship this weekend? You might even enjoy one another's company more without the pressure of the Christmas rush.

The St. Chad Gospels are a rare treasure. A beautifully illustrated, eighth-century Latin manuscript containing the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and part of Luke, it has endured for more than a thousand years. It is preserved at a cathedral in Litchfield, England, and is in delicate condition. Scholars from the University of Kentucky have recently been able, however, to use digital imaging techniques to make this manuscript available without further wear and tear. Computer technology allows those who wish to study the text and illustrations without having to travel to England or handle the physical manuscript.

Luke 2:21-52

The St. Chad Gospels manuscript tells the same story as the printed English Bible you hold in your hands today. In Luke's Gospel, the story is that the direction and purpose of Jesus' life were clear right from the beginning. This is seen in today's reading in two events that take place at the temple.

The first happened when Jesus was still a baby. Joseph and Mary came to offer ritual sacrifices for her post-birth purification and to dedicate their son to the Lord. While fulfilling these religious responsibilities, they encountered two faithful servants of God who had long been awaiting the Messiah. The Holy Spirit led first Simeon, then Anna, straight to the unremarkable-looking young couple and their baby. Simeon declared that God's saving love was found in this baby, not only for Jews but for all humanity—"a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel" (vv. 30-32).

The second occurrence at the temple took place years later, when the boy Jesus was twelve years old. His family had gone to Jerusalem for Passover, then headed home to Nazareth. Mary and Joseph thought that Jesus was among their travel group, and when they realized they had left Him behind they hurried back to the city. After several days of searching, they found Him in the temple, conversing as an equal with the rabbis. Though at the time no one understood, this episode revealed Jesus' awareness of His identity as well as His commitment to honor and obey His heavenly Father (v. 49).

Apply the Word - Anyone who's ever lost a child at a playground or the store has doubtless felt the same emotions as Mary and Joseph: sad, panicked, irritated, frantic, regretful, upset. I thought you were watching him! The humanity that permeates the Gospel narrative is here in all its richness. But Jesus was not only human, He was also divine. And so this very human story ends with a wonderful moment of divine strangeness: "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" (v. 49).

Luke 2:21-24

If she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons. - Leviticus 12:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 2004, the U.S. federal government changed the way they issued food stamps so dramatically that the name of the program became obsolete. The decades-old coupon system gave way to a debit card system managed entirely electronically. The new system made administration easier and fraud more difficult. And for those who benefited from the support, the change reduced another problem: the public embarrassment they felt every time they bought food.

In any economic system, situations arise when the poor simply can't hide their state of need. One such occasion in ancient Israel came at what should have been a joyous time: after the birth of a child. The form of their sacrifice made a public statement about their economic place in society.

According to the law, a woman was considered unclean after giving birth and required a waiting period followed by a sin offering and purification offering (Lev. 12:1-8). The sacrifices called for a lamb and a pigeon or dove, but a woman who couldn't afford a lamb could offer a dove in its place.

For Mary and Joseph, a lamb was too great a sacrifice to surrender (v. 24).

That's not to say Mary and Joseph felt ashamed by their need to offer the poor man's sacrifice—but Luke did point out this detail for a reason. Jesus was being presented in the temple as the firstborn son of Mary and Joseph, common people from Nazareth (cf. Ex. 13:2, 12). The doves used for Mary's sacrifices point out their lack of means—but their attention to the requirements of the Law is also one of many signs that Mary and Joseph were people of faith who obeyed the Word of God. They had nothing to be ashamed of.

If you read on in the verses that follow today's reading, you'll see that the family was greeted in the temple by Simeon and Anna. He received a greeting worthy of royalty and praise befitting a Savior. There was nothing common about this child and nothing poor about the supply of faith surrounding Him. Financial wealth was not a sign of the coming of His kingdom, but fulfilled prophecy was.

APPLY THE WORD

Many believers won't say it out loud, but our actions often reveal the underlying belief that social standing and financial success are important indicators of our spiritual well being. While there is definitely a spiritual, moral element to how we manage our money, being a strong believer does not guarantee prosperity. Today, find your true wealth from the status of your faith and obedience to Christ rather than your income or possessions.

Luke 2:16–21, 39–52

Jesus: The Holy Child

After a play, actors take a curtain call. Traditionally, the minor characters appear first. As the audience applauds, the actors and actresses continue to emerge in reverse order of importance until finally the star of the show arrives. At this point, the audience rises to their feet because this character, indeed, is the central focus of the show.

In this passage we focus on the central reason for Christmas: our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He arrived as a baby; God's Son was sent to earth in human form (Phil. 2:5–8). He is fully God and fully man.

The shepherds and Jesus' parents recognized that this was no ordinary baby (vv. 17, 19). They had all received messages given to them by angels! After Jesus' birth, the word spread thanks to the shepherds who had come to see Him. Eight days later, as was tradition, Jesus was named and circumcised. His parents were obedient to God and gave Him the name assigned by the angel (1:31).

Scripture doesn't give much information about Jesus' childhood other than that the "grace of God was on him" (2:40). Like any human child, He grew taller and stronger and learned more. We can infer from what the Bible tells us about Joseph and Mary that they reared Him in a home that feared the Lord and knew the Scriptures.

When Jesus was 12, he went to the temple during the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and then engaged the religious scholars there in conversation. When his parents found Him, Jesus gave them an unusual explanation: "Why were you searching for me? . . . Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" (v. 49). Mary and Joseph could not deny the truth and wisdom of this special child who was growing from their miraculous baby into His public ministry as God's Messiah.

KEY VERSE He was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived. (Luke 2:21)

Apply the Word - While human traditions like Santa Claus and Christmas trees often try to claim the spotlight, the focus must remain firmly on our Lord and Savior. Set aside a few moments right now, and perhaps later with your loved ones, to thank God for sending His Son in such a unique and supernatural way. May we, following His example, grow in wisdom and grace.

Luke 2:21-35

For my eyes have seen your salvation . . . a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel. - Luke 2:30, 32

TODAY IN THE WORD

Earlier this summer and fall, many economic experts and CEOs professed complete surprise at the subprime mortgage crisis and subsequent crisis in the credit markets. One economist, however, saw his predictions vindicated. Known as “Dr. Doom,” Nouriel Roubini had for several years warned of a wave of foreclosures and bank collapses. After receiving scorn from fellow economists and having his proposals ignored, Roubini suddenly found himself in demand by officials around the world who wanted his advice. The facts and events validated his forecasts.

Many people were caught off guard by the coming of Jesus, including the scribes, the priests, and King Herod. But it's encouraging to find that the original Christmas did not come as a surprise to everyone! Some people understood God's promises and were waiting faithfully for the day of fulfillment to come. Simeon was one of them: a “righteous and devout” man who had long been waiting for the “consolation of Israel,” that is, the Messiah (v. 25), and had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would live long enough to see his heart's desire (v. 26). He had not only a general trust in God's promises, but also a sensitivity to the Spirit's leading at specific times to specific places, as in this instance (v. 27).

Purification (v. 22), which the Law commanded for firstborns, took place 40 days after the birth and symbolized a commitment of a child to the lifelong service of the Lord. The fact that Mary and Joseph brought a pair of doves or pigeons indicated their relative poverty. Simeon's words of praise (vv. 29-32), called the *Nunc Dimittis* (from the Latin translation of the opening words), focused on the theme of God's salvation of both Jews and Gentiles and echoed the language of Isaiah. He also, however, warned Mary that her son would walk a rocky road on the way to accomplishing God's purposes and that she herself would suffer along the way (vv. 34-35).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Rejoice, the King has come! This day is not about the gifts or the food or even the loved ones. It's about Christ, and the tremendous, incomprehensible, loving fact that God became a man. As we celebrate the birth of Jesus on this day, let us also be like Simeon and look forward to His coming again. The King will return: “Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready” (Rev. 19:7).

Luke 2:22-38

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. - Luke 1:68

TODAY IN THE WORD

One of the most touching accounts in the Old Testament is that of the barren Hannah. For years, this devout wife prayed for a child, only to remain childless. Finally, in God's perfect timing, she conceived and gave birth to Samuel, who would become one of the most significant figures in Israel's history. When Hannah dedicated young Samuel to the Lord, she proclaimed, “I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him” (1 Sam. 1:27).

Over a thousand years later, the birth of another young boy was anticipated by much prayer and was greeted with even greater praise and thanksgiving. In fact, prayer and worship surrounded the birth of Jesus. Luke 1 records Mary's beautiful worship song (the Magnificat) and Zechariah's praise (the Benedictus). Luke 2:13 tells us that the angels broke out in praise when the Savior's birth was announced.

Today's passage records yet another outpouring of prayer and praise accompanying Jesus' birth. Luke tells us that Joseph and Mary took the infant Jesus to the Temple to dedicate Him to the Lord as prescribed in the Law. Joseph and Mary clearly knew that theirs was no ordinary child, and they had already witnessed remarkable events surrounding His birth (Luke 2:16–20). Even so, they probably were unprepared for what was about to happen in the Temple.

Luke says that righteous Simeon had been waiting his entire life for “the consolation of Israel,” or the Messiah (v. 25). Through the Holy Spirit, the Lord revealed to Simeon that the small child with Joseph and Mary was indeed the answer to the prayers of many. Realizing this, Simeon spontaneously praised the Sovereign Lord (vv. 29-32). The elderly prophetess Anna had a similar response.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Perhaps you have never really considered Jesus' prayer life before. Or perhaps you've never looked at it in any detail. It's our prayer that this month's study will help you learn more about this vital aspect of our Lord and encourage you in your own prayer life. To prepare for this study, take some time to list examples you remember of Jesus praying or teaching about prayer. You might read the

first few chapters of Luke and note references to Jesus and prayer.

Luke 2:22–26

Simeon: Seeking Consolation

On the day following Christmas, it is easy to assume that the significant parts of the Christmas story are past. We have studied angels, John the Baptist, Herod, and even Jesus. Yet, in the days following Christ's birth, we meet several individuals who exhibit long-suffering faith. The first of these is Simeon.

We know Simeon was "righteous and devout" man (v. 25). He was in Jerusalem when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple for dedication. We know that Simeon was a man of God: "the Holy Spirit was on him" (v. 25). He had been looking his entire life for "the consolation of Israel" (v. 25). God had promised him that he would not die without seeing Jesus. What an amazing moment it must have been when he held Jesus in his arms—the answer to his prayers and those of his nation.

For the Jewish people, the consolation of Israel was the reward for lives of waiting and suffering. The promised Messiah would prove the faithfulness of God. In 1843, one Jewish writer explained this sense of longing, "Surely the Lord will reward your confiding trust; and may He give you, and all those who await His coming, glory instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the robe of praise instead of the spirit of heaviness."

While the consolation of Israel was focused on the Jewish people, John Piper notes that this longing remains for each of us today: "If there is any deep longing in your heart for a consolation and comfort that this world cannot satisfy, it is because God is preparing you to recognize and receive his gift: Jesus Christ, the consolation of Israel. Don't seek it anywhere but in him."

KEY VERSE The Holy Spirit [revealed] that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. (Luke 2:26)

Apply the Word - What are you longing for today? Sometimes our sense of sadness following great celebrations is a reflection of our heavenly calling. Nothing on this earth will ever truly satisfy the deepest longing of our hearts. As Piper advises, "Don't seek it anywhere but in him." Ask God today, and allow Him, to fulfill the deepest longings of your heart.

Worship: Simeon and Anna Praise God

Read Luke 2:22–40

My eyes have seen your salvation.

Luke 2:30

Mary and Joseph had been told by angels that their son was no ordinary boy, but like all firstborn sons, they took Him to the temple at the appointed time to be consecrated to the Lord. While there, they received more extraordinary signs that Jesus is indeed special.

At the temple the small family met Simeon and Anna, two righteous Jews who had waited expectantly for the redemption of their people for their entire lives. That one hope—the coming of God's kingdom on earth—had been the animating force of their lives. And while both were nearing the end of their days on earth, the Holy Spirit had promised Simeon he would not die before meeting his Savior.

We don't know if anyone else was watching or, if they were, that onlookers would have known what was happening—that Simeon's steadfast righteousness was being rewarded by a glimpse of the baby in his arms. Surely there were tears in Simeon's eyes as he praised God, "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations" (vv. 30–31).

Mary and Joseph's reaction—amazement—to Simeon's prayer of thanksgiving reminds us that while these new parents knew the prophecies about the Messiah, they didn't necessarily know how that would translate into the practicalities of parenting the young Jesus. Simeon offered a word to further prepare the parents for what was to come—Jesus would bear fruit at a great cost to many, including Mary and Joseph. Mary would certainly suffer, perhaps as early as Jesus's twelfth year (2:41–51), but certainly during His public ministry and death (8:19–20; 23:49; Acts 1:14).

Apply the Word - God blessed Simeon and Anna for their faithful waiting. Because we live in the time after Christ's earthly ministry, we don't have to wait to experience the peace that comes from the salvation the baby Jesus would grow up to provide the whole world. Pray today, thanking God for His faithfulness in fulfilling His promises by sending His son, Jesus Christ

Luke 2:25-38

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 1854, British ships were allowed to dock at the port of Nagasaki, Japan; but contact with foreigners was strictly forbidden. In fact, the Japanese army watched the ships closely to enforce that policy.

One day a New Testament fell overboard from a British ship and was found floating in the harbor by the Japanese commander assigned to watch the ship. When he learned that it was the sacred book of the Christians, he decided to learn its contents. Somehow he acquired a translation, read it with deep interest, and with the help of a missionary put his faith in Jesus Christ.

God will never leave Himself without a witness to His Word and His great deeds. That is clearly evident in today's text. Simeon and Anna were not among the elite of Israel. But since the chief priests and the teachers of the law refused to praise and glorify God for the gift of the Messiah, God raised up two faithful witnesses.

When Simeon arrived, Joseph and Mary were in the process of completing Mary's purification in the temple. Gazing at the Christ-child, he praised God for His faithfulness in allowing him to behold the Savior of both Jews and Gentiles (vv. 28-32). Simeon's blessing and prophecy of Jesus' work of redemption caused Mary and Joseph to look on with amazement. Mary especially took to heart Simeon's prophecy concerning the price she would pay to see her son fulfill His destiny to redeem a lost world (v. 35).

The content of Anna's blessing and praise is not recorded, but her intention is clear. Her faith and devotion made her a witness to other faithful Israelites who were looking for God's redemption.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

On Thursday, we talked about the importance of expressing appreciation to special people.

As you and your family work on thank-you notes for the gifts you have received, go through your Christmas cards to see if they suggest the name of someone who could use a word of greeting and encouragement from you.

Luke 2:27–35

Simeon: Seeing Salvation

A poem by Robert Herrick describes the Candlemas tradition: "Down with the rosemary, and so / Down with the bays and mistletoe; / Down with the holly, ivy, all, / Wherewith ye dress'd the Christmas Hall." Candlemas is celebrated 40 days past Christmas, traditionally when decorations and greenery would be removed from people's home. It signifies the day when Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the temple to be blessed.

Jewish law stipulated that women had to come to the temple for purification forty days after bearing a male child. Mary and Joseph followed the law and brought their infant to the temple. There they met Simeon, who took Jesus in his arms and blessed him. Simeon's words are moving and prophetic.

He identified Jesus as Messiah—"my eyes have seen your salvation" (v. 30). He also declared that this coming of the Savior was not just for the Jewish people, but would also extend to the Gentiles (v. 32). He then described the pain that would happen to both Jesus and Mary as a result of the sacrifice He would make (vv. 34–35).

Joseph and Mary "marveled" at the things that Simeon said (v. 33). While they had both experienced angelic visits, they were learning more and more about their baby, the Son of God, who would grow up to be their Savior.

Simeon's prayer of blessing in verses 29 through 32 has remained an integral part of churches today as part of liturgy, Scripture reading, and prayers. These words have even been set to music because they so beautifully represent the wonder and glory of the Incarnation.

KEY VERSE For my eyes have seen your salvation. (Luke 2:30)

Apply the Word - When you take down Christmas decorations, consider marking the event by meditating on this passage. What does Christmas mean in your life? How has the coming of Christ made a lasting difference that extends far beyond the reach of the December holiday? How can you testify to others about the way that Jesus brings light to the world?

Luke 2:32 Isaiah 49:1-23

You have prepared . . . a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel. - Luke 2:32

TODAY IN THE WORD

Researchers have noted that rates of depression and anxiety are higher during the winter and in areas of the country that receive

less sunlight, but they didn't know whether this was a correlation or if the lack of sunlight was the cause. Even if there was a connection, there didn't seem to be much remedy other than moving to a sunnier location. Now Seasonal Affective Disorder, the depression some people experience from a lack of light, has been recognized, and sufferers are able to get special light machines that imitate sunlight and reduce their symptoms.

Just as sunlight is necessary for our physical and emotional health, the Bible uses light as a metaphor for salvation, indicating that God's light is essential for spiritual life.

As we've seen in our study, God's intention for choosing Israel was that it might be a blessing to other nations. Yesterday we saw that God was faithful to meet the needs of Gentiles even when the nation was in great crisis and rebellion. We also know that eventually this sin would lead to the nation's exile. Elijah was one of the early prophets whom God raised up to warn the people to repent and to display the power of the living God when the people were worshiping lifeless idols. But God also used the prophets to articulate His promises of restoration and future hope. In Isaiah 40-66, we find a series of powerful prophecies, sometimes called the Servant Songs, that refer to the Servant of the Lord.

In Isaiah 49, we learn that this Servant will restore Israel to the Lord. For a nation facing exile, this was certainly comforting to hear. God's plans for the Servant extended to the ends of the earth: "I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth" (v. 6). Indeed, the work of this Servant will be so great that kings will bow before Him.

Although there are obvious messianic hopes in today's passage, it's also true that the nation itself had been called to be a light to the Gentiles. Part of Isaiah's message included a reminder to the nation of God's intended purposes for them.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The theme of "a light to the Gentiles" extends well into the New Testament. We first see it in Simeon's praise in Luke 2:29-32. Simeon well understood that Jesus was the promised Servant of Isaiah.

Interestingly, the term is appropriated by Paul in Acts 13:47 concerning his own call to the Gentiles. When his Gentile listeners heard about God's plan for them, they rejoiced! These links between the Old and New Testaments help us to see that missions is no afterthought in the plan of God!

Luke 2:36-40

She gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. - Luke 2:38

TODAY IN THE WORD

A traditional Christmas legend recounts that when Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were fleeing to Egypt, they were concealed from Herod's soldiers by holly, which miraculously grew leaves out of season in order to hide the family. Since that day, holly has been an evergreen and part of Christmas celebrations in many cultures. We sing "Deck the halls with boughs of holly" and decorate our doors with wreaths of holly. Some people also believe that its sharply pointed leaves represent Christ's crown of thorns and its red berries His blood. In classical paintings, holly is a symbol of His Passion.

As a prophetess, Anna saw the shadow of the cross looming over the story of the baby that Simeon held in his arms. Simeon had just warned Mary that Jesus would be a sign some people would reject and that "the thoughts of many hearts [would] be revealed" (v. 35), meaning that both faithful and sinful attitudes would be brought to light by people's responses to the person of Christ. Suddenly Anna appeared at Simeon's elbow.

Who was Anna? Her role was much the same as Simeon's. She was an elderly believer who had centered her life around worship and the promises of God. She was known as a righteous woman and a prophetess (v. 37). There is no mention that she had received a specific promise as Simeon had, but her appearance at that exact moment was no accident. The Spirit had led her there and empowered her to recognize baby Jesus and prophesy concerning Him. Her words served as an additional confirmation and witness to "all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem" (v. 38).

After this divine appointment, Mary and Joseph finally returned home to Nazareth, following their postnatal stay in Bethlehem (v. 39). They had much to reflect on! In the meantime, their little boy grew in wisdom and grace (v. 40).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

What do you desire for your children, or for the children whom God has placed in your life? What are your goals and dreams for them? Sometimes we get too caught up in temporal pursuits such as school or sports or music lessons. Verse 40 provides some needed perspective, reminding us that Jesus grew both physically and spiritually (cf. Luke 2:52). Use this verse in your prayer to the Lord today, submitting to Him all the goals, plans, hopes, and dreams that you have for your children.

Luke 2:36–38

Anna: Woman of Prayer

Peggy and Billy Harris were married six weeks before he left to serve as a pilot in World War II. Shortly after, he was reported missing in action, and Peggy was left a widow. In 2005, she learned that Billy had died in 1944 in Nazi occupied northern France. As his plane went down, the brave pilot managed to avoid a small village, sparing hundreds of lives. In gratitude, the village buried him and even named a street in his honor. More than fifty years later, Peggy learned that her husband's memory had been honored in this village for decades.

In today's passage, we meet a widow named Anna. Anna had also spent a lifetime of waiting and mourning. She had lived as a widow for most of her adult life. Her husband died after they had been married for just seven years (vv. 36–37). In addition to her identity as a widow, Anna was a devoted servant of God and is described as a prophet.

In the New Testament era, young widows were left without economic support, and so they were encouraged to remarry in order to have some kind of economic protection. Yet Anna did not remarry; she devoted herself to God with tireless passion. She is described by her life of service and her habit of fasting and prayer. She was certainly a woman of God. It is fitting then, that such a woman would have this opportunity to see Jesus (v. 38).

The passage notes that immediately she begins thanking God for this gift of the Savior. A lifetime of spiritual discipline had given her spiritual insight. She spread the word that this tiny child was the "redemption of Jerusalem" (v. 38).

KEY VERSE She gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2:38)

Apply the Word - No matter what your circumstances, God has a unique call on your life. Whether we are young or old, married or single, God promises to use a heart wholly devoted to Him. Pray today that God will help you seek Him first in all things and to give you patience to see His plans revealed in your life.

Luke 2:41–51

Wolfgang Mozart was performing on concert tours before he was 10 years old. Jessica Watson sailed around the world alone at the age of 16. Tathagat Avatar Tulsi earned his Ph.D. in physics by the time he was 22.

Exceptional young people are capable of amazing accomplishments, but the demonstration of spiritual wisdom by the boy Jesus surpasses them all. Maybe it was better that no one understood what Jesus said. He was 12 years old, He hadn't yet come of age, but He also had amazed the onlookers in the temple with His understanding. Perhaps His most important piece of wisdom was lost on all who heard: Jesus said He was busy about His Father's affairs.

There is confusion even today about what exactly Jesus said in verse 49. Was He saying He had to be in His Father's house or that He had to be involved in His Father's work? The former would relate more directly to His question, "Why were you searching for me?" But the latter explanation better applies to Mary's question of why Jesus stayed behind. His purpose wasn't simply to be in a certain place but to begin to do the work His heavenly Father intended.

Whatever Jesus meant to say, Mary and Joseph did not comprehend it. And the truth is, if they or anyone else had, the repercussions could have been severe. In John's Gospel, when Jesus dismissed complaints about healing on the Sabbath by saying that He was about the work of His Father, the response was angry. People wanted to kill Him, not for doing the Lord's work but for saying that God was His personal Father. It was tantamount to equating Himself with God (John 5:18)! True as the statement was, many of the religious leaders could not comprehend how this statement could be coherent with their idea of one God.

As it was, everyone—leaders and laymen alike—was amazed by the boy Jesus. What's interesting is that they marveled at the understanding He displayed and His understanding of the Word of God.

Apply the Word

We can take to heart the reaction of these eyewitnesses as we pray each day. What do you request most often from God? Material provision? Physical health? Safety? God has the power to answer them. But why not ask first and foremost for greater understanding of God and His Word? We desire this not to show off or impress others, but so that we, like Jesus, can be about our Father's business. May we never cease to be amazed by and to thirst for His wisdom.

Luke 2:39–52

When taking their child to the pediatrician for well-baby examinations, the highlight for many parents comes when the little one is

measured and weighed and then the numbers are plotted on a growth chart. It's interesting to see that little Johnny's projected adult height will be 5'10" or that little Mary's growth pattern looks just like her older sister's. More importantly, those measurements help to determine whether a child is growing consistently and appropriately.

Just as we expect a healthy baby to grow and learn, so also believers should be growing and learning as a sign of spiritual health. Jesus Himself exemplified this kind of growth for us.

Scripture doesn't record many details from Jesus' childhood. In our passage today, we see that as Jesus grew older, He also grew in wisdom and grace (v. 40). Immediately after this general description, the Gospel of Luke provides an example of this growth. At the age of 12, Jesus made the annual trip to Jerusalem to observe Passover with His parents. This time, though, He didn't return home with them. After three frantic days of searching, they found Him in the Temple courts interacting with the teachers.

Jesus' wisdom and knowledge were on display: "Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers" (v. 47). Even His parents were astonished. Jesus was not simply a prodigy or theological savant, however. He demonstrated His growth in grace by what He did next: He returned home with His parents and "was obedient to them" (v. 51). Already at this young age, Jesus did not claim His divine rights or demand special treatment on account of His status (see Phil. 2:5–8). This episode was not the final stage of spiritual development, either. Jesus continued to grow in wisdom (v. 52).

Jesus demonstrated that growth requires action—through His habits, He put Himself in the physical and spiritual space where knowledge and grace of God would shape Him. And Jesus is the perfect example of being filled with wisdom and grace in order to minister to others.

Apply the Word

If we want to grow in knowledge and grace of our Lord, we need to know the practices that enabled His own growth. He made study of Scripture a priority (see Matt. 4:23; 9:35; Mark 1:21; John 18:20). He was committed to times of prayer (see Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16; 11:1; John 17; Heb. 5:7). He extended compassion to those who were suffering or marginalized (see Matt. 19:13; Mark 2:17; Luke 8:43; John 9:1). Jesus is the example of how to grow and why to grow in our spiritual life.

LUKE 3

Luke 3

Both Matthew and Luke include genealogies of Jesus in their Gospels. According to New Testament professor Grant Osborne, Matthew organizes his genealogy into three groups of fourteen names each, thus emphasizing Jesus' kingly ancestry in the line of David. Luke's purpose, though, is a bit different. His genealogy goes all the way back to Adam, thus focusing on Jesus' universal humanity as well as affirming the claim that He is the unique Son of God. That's why Luke placed his genealogy between Jesus' baptism and temptation (see 3:22; 3:38; 4:3), instead of at the beginning of the narrative (as in Matthew).

Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist marked the beginning of His public ministry. John's own ministry of preparing the way had begun, like that of previous prophets, when the word of the Lord came to him (v. 2). His mission was to prepare the way for the Messiah, and he was well aware that in doing so he was fulfilling a prophecy of Isaiah (vv. 4–6). His message was one of repentance and forgiveness. This was not an easy message to bring, for it included strong condemnations of sin and warnings of God's wrath, from which the Jews' status as God's chosen people would not protect them. "Speaking truth to power" landed him in jail when he dared to condemn King Herod's immorality. But those who believed John were baptized, signifying faith and a public commitment to live out his words.

We might legitimately wonder why Jesus was baptized. He had no sins to confess and no need for repentance. But by allowing John to baptize Him, He identified Himself with John's ministry and message. Indeed, the themes of repentance and forgiveness would be at the heart of His own ministry and of the gospel.

In addition, this event revealed the person and ministry of Christ as recognized and approved by the other two members of the Trinity: "The Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased'" (v. 22).

Apply the Word

Repentance is much more than a prayer. Confession must be followed by turning away from sin toward righteousness: "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (v. 8). Scripture gives specific, concrete instructions to those who repent, such as to share with those in need and not to abuse positions of power. Jesus preached this: "No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit" (6:43). Seek to live in accordance with your confession and repentance today.

Luke 3:2–18

John the Baptist: Coming Soon

In most movie theatres, the feature presentation is delayed due to previews of coming attractions. Viewers must sit through trailers of future films, commercials, and warnings to turn off cell phones before the lights finally dim and the curtains widen to show the main movie. John the Baptist recognized that his role in life was a preview: preparing people for the coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Today's passage skips ahead to the years after John the Baptist was born. John was six months older than Jesus, and the two were relatives, so they probably knew one another as children. As he grew older, he spent much of his time in the wilderness (v. 2). But, like Jesus, the time came for his public ministry and he began preaching repentance and forgiveness in the district "around the Jordan" (v. 3).

As described centuries earlier in Isaiah 40:3–5, John was the "voice of one calling in the wilderness" (v. 4). He urged his listeners to prepare for the arrival of their promised Messiah. How should they do this? Through the set of instructions in verses 10 through 14. This doesn't imply that they could earn their own salvation; rather, people whose lives are shaped by the Savior will seek to treat others justly and mercifully.

John recognized that he was not the focus of the message. His job was to point his followers to the One who could save them. He compared the baptism he offered—water—to the baptism of the "Holy Spirit and fire" that Jesus will bring to believers (v. 16). John proclaimed his own unworthiness in comparison. The image of fire is repeated in verse 17, another warning if the people refuse to recognize Jesus as Lord and repent of their sins.

KEY VERSE A voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Prepare the way for the Lord." (Luke 3:4)

Apply the Word - Jesus Christ should be the main "attraction" this holiday season. It is easy to let the preparations for Christmas to distract us from the main event. Be careful not to let our focus on Christ's birth get lost. Set aside time each day to recognize Him—not just as a baby in the manger, but as the Savior of a needy world.

Luke 3:7–14

In ancient Persia, no male between the ages of 15 and 50 could escape army service. A man named Pythius approached King Xerxes with a request. Might Xerxes exempt the eldest of his five sons from the military? Xerxes not only denied the request, he took Pythius's son and had his body hacked in two, so that the departing army could march between his body as they left the city. Approaching the king came with great risk.

With sin comes guilt, and guilt brings fear. Over the next three days we will see that when we approach the King of kings, we have nothing to fear. This is true because of God's nature, but also because of what God seeks to accomplish through repentance.

In our reading today let's assume the perspective of those that heard the Baptist's message. Here we have a fiery preacher who lived in the desert, perhaps alone. He ate locusts. He used strong and vivid language (v. 7). He rebuked Herod, surely knowing what that might mean (3:19–20). One might easily fear this man, not for his anger, but because of his holiness.

This fear may have been heightened by John's words in verse 7. His words went to "the crowds," and in verse 8 he seemingly removed the last of their spiritual defenses. Not even membership in the nation of Israel got them a pass.

Having been verbally dressed down, with no leg to stand on, they responded in the only way possible, "What should we do then?" Surely this took great courage. What might this crazy prophet tell them to do? Would it be the modern equivalent of, "Sell everything and be a missionary in Greenland"? What does repentance mean?

John indicated that repentance means that some things must change, but these things are simple, obvious, and straightforward. Share food and resources. Don't cheat others. Be content. We might even think, "They got off easy!" But to think this is to miss the point. God is not impressed much by what we have done or will do, and John understood this. He does care greatly about who we are. Repentance involves transformation first and foremost, not action.

Apply the Word

Many of us may fear to approach God by baring our souls. We may cringe in anticipation of what God will "require" of us, and so stay away. But we can trust God's loving embrace. He is not standing by with a cosmic whip, waiting to flog us into submission. Rather, He sent His Son to redeem us and sends His Holy Spirit to transform us. Let us turn to Him today with hope instead of fear.

Luke 3:7-14.

TODAY IN THE WORD

Earlier this year, an overloaded ferry boat capsized on Africa's Lake Victoria, claiming the lives of more than 600 passengers. Some of the 114 survivors reported that the captain and eight-man crew of the ferry, who were from Tanzania, had taken bribes to let extra passengers on board. The reports led to the crew being charged with causing hundreds of deaths.

Dishonesty is always harmful, and in this case it proved to be tragic. We know that honesty is the best policy in our financial dealings with one another. It's not only best, as a matter of fact: it's biblical.

As we begin the second section of our study, we will consider money and finances from the perspective of our relationship with other people.

We have been reminded that economics is God's idea, part of His creation and therefore good in and of itself. It is God, the Scriptures tell us, who gives us the power to earn and accumulate money. And He is actively interested in what we do with what He has given us. This includes not only how we act toward Him, but also how we act toward one another.

In these verses from Luke 3, you can see how foundational honesty is to our financial dealings. John the Baptist has appeared on the scene in a dramatic way, calling Israel to repentance in preparation for the coming of Messiah, the Lord Jesus.

In his exhortation to the crowds who came to hear him, John gave specific steps that would prove the sincerity of their repentance. Generosity is highlighted in verse 11, and we'll talk more about that at a later date.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Financial advisor Larry Burkett says honesty in our finances is more than a matter of not stealing or cheating on taxes.

LUKE 4

Luke 4

If the Gospel of Luke were a courtroom drama, today's reading marks a shift from testimony to hostile cross-examination. Yesterday, not only John the Baptist but also God the Father and God the Holy Spirit testified to the reality of the arrival of the Messiah and His identity as God the Son. The Father said, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (3:22). Now Satan entered the scene like an opposing lawyer finally given permission to question the defendant. His clear intention was to disprove or call into doubt the person and mission of Christ.

He planned to do that by tempting Him to sin. If he could get the Son of God to sin, the mission of redemption would be over. The plan of salvation would be finished, wrecked before it had really begun.

The first temptation was straightforward, trying to provoke Jesus to use His divine power to meet a physical need (for food). The second was more subtle, taunting Jesus to establish His kingdom by a road other than suffering and death. The third was even more devilish, as Satan used biblical words to try to manipulate Jesus to perform a sign that would gain Him public recognition as the Messiah.

Full of the Holy Spirit and quoting Scripture, Jesus successfully resisted these temptations. To the first, He responded that His power was not for selfish use. To the second, He rejected an alternative road as one that would involve disobeying His Father and the blasphemous act of worshiping Satan. To the third, He saw through the tempter's twisting of Scripture to justify wrongdoing and dismissed both Satan and his specious reasoning.

Then Jesus walked out of the desert and began His public ministry. His first public words quoted Isaiah to identify Himself as the Messiah (vv. 15–21). He taught. He cast out demons. He worked miracles of healing. He encountered some faith, but more often surprise, anger, and rejection. These narrative events in Luke 4—temptation, miracles, and rejection—form a preview or microcosm of the entire life and ministry of Christ.

Apply the Word

Jesus experienced temptations throughout His life (v. 13). How can we resist them as He did (Heb. 4:14–16)? One key is to know and use the Word of God—Jesus quoted Scripture in response to all three temptations. Another key is to be full of the Holy Spirit and controlled by Him. With the Spirit at the wheel, one cannot steer wrong. Finally, because He saw Satan's shortcuts as dead ends, Jesus was unwilling to consider anything less than full obedience to His Father.

Luke 4:1-12

The Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. - Mark 1:12-13

TODAY IN THE WORD

The legendary Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu wrote in *The Art of War*, "The highest form of generalship is to conquer the enemy by strategy." This also describes the tactic that our greatest enemy, Satan, uses in his spiritual warfare against humanity. Satan's strategy against Jesus in the desert—half-truths and cunning deception—is the same that he uses to this very day.

The first test concerns provision. Although Satan in some sense acknowledged Jesus' divine sonship, he tempted Jesus to take matters into His own hands, rather than trust the Father to provide. Jesus refused to enter into any discussion and instead quoted from Deuteronomy 8:3. The rest of this verse says that, rather than bread, we're to live on God's Word, which is exactly what Jesus was doing during the temptation.

The second test concerns power. Somehow Satan was able to show Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and offered them to Him. After his boasting, Satan slipped in the fact that to receive these kingdoms, Jesus would have to worship him in the process. Breaking the first commandment was clearly not something that Jesus would do, as His quote from Deuteronomy 6:13 showed. Besides, the Father would give all the kingdoms of the world to His Son, so Satan was actually tempting Jesus to avoid the cross and His redemptive work.

The third test concerns protection. Satan took Jesus to the highest part of temple, probably the Royal Porch, which overlooked the Kidron Valley, some 450 feet below. To jump from there meant certain death. Here Satan upped the ante by quoting Scripture himself (Ps. 91:11-12), but twisting it horribly. Jesus replied with Deuteronomy 6:16, clearly understanding that testing God is not the way to prove His protection.

Jesus' complete faithfulness to the Father in this trial anticipated His faithfulness on the cross, the event that meant Satan's decisive defeat.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Satan tests us in the same area in which Jesus was tested—our faithfulness to God. Today's passage shows that responding in faithfulness depends upon knowing God's Word. As we learn His Word, the Spirit brings it to our attention at just the right moment. Are you growing in knowledge of the Word? If you aren't already in a Bible study or Sunday school class, consider joining one this month. In addition to your daily Bible study, you'll grow from studying the Word with other believers.

Luke 4:1–13

Jesus Was Tempted As We Are

A child riding in his mother's shopping cart grabs a pack of gum when she's busy paying the cashier. A young woman has maxed out her credit card, but decides to buy just "one more thing." In the quiet of his home, though he's promised both himself and his wife he would stop, a middle-aged man powers on a computer holding images that will harm his relationships.

Tempted—driven by our feelings—we reach for that which we think will satisfy.

Between the Dead Sea and the inhabitable part of Judea was a dry, dusty wilderness. It's name, Jeshimmon, means "devastation." Simmering with dry heat, its cliffs reached up to 1,200 feet. In Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Scripture called *The Message*, he says Jesus was in this wilderness for "the Test," which the devil was ready to give. Peterson continues, "Jesus prepared for the test by fasting forty days and nights (Matt. 4:1–3). Though modern readers might easily imagine that the forty days of fasting was the test, Jesus was preparing His spirit for the actual exam!

"The Test" Satan delivers is the same kind we face. "Can you really trust in what your Father provides? You can turn this stone to bread!" "Do you really believe you're God's Son? Prove it!" "Why wait? Worship me and all this can be yours!" Though the desert is the geographical antithesis of the fullness of the Garden of Eden, the scene resonates with Eve's temptation, when the serpent slyly suggests, "Are you sure God's got your back? Reach for the fruit!"

Today, we stand between the desert and the first Garden, faced with the same temptations. May our voices join Jesus' in saying, "Worship the Lord your God and serve him only" (v. 8).

Apply the Word

Most of us can recognize some ways we are tempted by the deceiver. Whether we're tempted to reach for a pint of ice cream or to swallow a drink from a bottle, we—like Jesus—can trust in our Father's faithfulness. Today, find one opportunity to join Jesus, saying to temptation, "No thanks, I'll trust in what my Father provides."

Luke 4:13-30

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit. - Luke 4:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

Pastor John Ross from First Community Church in Columbus, Ohio, once quipped, "What's the definition of a 'church expert'? Anyone who lives more than 45 minutes away from your church!" He went on to tell about an experience he'd had before a weekend retreat. It was common to bring in a well-known speaker, but on this occasion Pastor Ross was to be the speaker. A church member who was trying to decide if she should attend called with her concerns: "That seems like a lot of money for a weekend retreat . . . it might be different if there was going to be a really dynamic speaker, but it's just you leading it, right?"

Jesus could relate to this experience. Soon after His baptism, Jesus returned home and went to the local synagogue. During the service, it was customary to read two Scripture passages. Afterwards, someone would give a sermon, often based on these readings. After Jesus read from Isaiah 61, the people would have expected Him to start preaching.

In a sense, that's exactly what He did, in perhaps the shortest sermon ever heard in that synagogue! Through the words of Isaiah, Jesus announced that He was the One who had been anointed by the Spirit for God's ministry to the poor and oppressed. Although many listening may have been financially poor, their greater poverty was their spiritual condition, as seen in their response to Jesus.

At first, the townspeople were amazed by Jesus' words. But when they remembered that He was just a local boy, they weren't quite so sure. The proverb that Jesus repeated to them (v. 23) showed that they wanted Jesus to prove Himself by doing there in Capernaum the miracles and signs that they had heard He had done elsewhere. Rather than comply with their desire for Him to put on a show, Jesus indicated that the spiritual poverty in Capernaum was similar to Elijah's time, when the prophet could only perform miracles for Gentiles outside Israel, because of the Israelites' great disbelief.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

In what ways might we be like the people in Capernaum, who wanted amazing miracles or show-stopping signs from Jesus instead of the Spirit-led One who fulfilled God's Word? It's true that the Holy Spirit can do miraculous works for the glory of God, but His work in our lives usually seems more ordinary—helping us understand Scripture, convicting us of our sin, recalling to mind the spiritual truths we need. We must not ignore this work of God in the pursuit of flashy experiences.

Luke 4:13-28 1 Kings 17:7-24;

He has filled the hungry with good things. - Luke 1:53

TODAY IN THE WORD

All morning long Tommy's mom talked with him about the importance of sharing his toys. Each time she asked if Tommy understood, he nodded his head and agreed to share his things when the other three-year-olds showed up for a play date. But when one of the kids picked up one of his toy trucks, Tommy ran over and grabbed the truck. Baffled, his mother came over and asked Tommy if he remembered their earlier discussion about sharing. Tommy nodded yes. Slowly it began to dawn on her that Tommy hadn't grasped that sharing meant actually letting others play with his toys!

Sadly, many Jews living in Jesus' day seemed to have a similar problem. For them, the issue concerned the intended recipients of the Messiah. Knowing that the gospel would eventually extend beyond Palestine, Jesus appealed to the account of Elijah and the widow in Zarephath to show that the blessings of God were also intended for the Gentiles. But the people listening to Jesus didn't want to be reminded of that (Luke 4:28-29).

It's somewhat remarkable that Elijah ministered to the widow of Zarephath considering the horrible state of Israel at that time. Ahab, a very evil king, together with his wife, Jezebel, a native of Sidon, introduced perverse Baal worship to Israel. Much of Elijah's ministry centered on exposing the falseness of Baalism and calling the people back to the Lord God.

When Elijah first encounters this poor widow, it's not clear how his request for food and water could be a blessing to her. Under normal circumstances, widows were among the poorest of the poor, but during a famine their situation could be life-threatening (v. 12). But her willingness to help Elijah opens the way for a miraculous provision for her (vv. 15-16).

Next the woman is faced with yet another challenge, the illness of her son. The harshness of her circumstances may explain why she initially blames the illness on Elijah. The loving Lord used Elijah to restore her son and to reveal Himself to this needy woman.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The story of the widow of Zarephath reminds us that there is no limit to the depth of God's love. Just as the oil kept refilling itself in her jar, so too God's ability to provide never runs dry. This is a good reminder, because sometimes we can be envious of God's blessing to others, especially nonbelievers, thinking that somehow we deserve that blessing instead. It is possible that God is blessing others so that they too will come to know the Lord as this widow did.

Luke 4:14–22

Jesus: Son of Man

Every year, actor Will Smith returns to Philadelphia to support nonprofits that work against violence. Last year, he and his son returned to applaud the efforts of a program helping teens in underprivileged communities. When movie stars visit their hometowns, they usually make headlines. It is wonderful when they use this attention to focus on important causes.

In today's passage, Jesus returned to Nazareth, where He grew up, and again preached at the synagogue. The passage follows His baptism by John the Baptist and His temptation in the desert in Luke 4. By this time word had spread about Jesus and His message. His teaching in synagogues was well received (vv. 14–15).

While most of our traditional Christmas decorations feature Jesus as a baby, His purpose on earth went far beyond His infancy. To demonstrate that purpose, Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah 61 to announce His anointing and commissioning by the Holy Spirit. This text describes the purpose of Christ's coming: "to proclaim the good news to the poor" and to "set the oppressed free" (v. 18).

Jesus read the passage and sat down. He had the attention of everyone in the synagogue. He chose that moment, in His hometown, among those He had known His entire life, to reveal His heavenly purpose. "Today," Jesus said, "this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (v. 21).

Initially the people responded positively to this declaration, but they also had questions. They wondered how this ordinary young man could claim to be the fulfillment of prophecy: "Isn't this Joseph's son?" (v. 22). Jesus was claiming to be the Son of God, sent to redeem the world.

KEY VERSE The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because He has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. (Luke 4:18)

Apply the Word - One good way to begin a discussion about your faith is to ask the person who they think Jesus is. As you listen, their answer will reveal their beliefs about the Son of God and allow you to share your own faith. Especially during this season, may we share the news about the salvation found in Jesus.

Luke 4:14–30

When American Idol winner, David Cook, returned to his hometown, 10,000 tickets sold out instantly, buttons and t-shirts adorned hysterical fans, and the city buzzed with excitement. David took center stage at his former high school where admirers gathered to pay homage to their hometown hero. In every sense of the show's title, David is the American idol of Blue Springs, Missouri. In our reading today, when Jesus stepped into the limelight in his old neighborhood, the locals were not as welcoming.

After 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus traveled to the region of Galilee and began teaching in the synagogue. His fame spread quickly, and the general public praised Him (v. 15). When Jesus arrived in His hometown, He visited the synagogue on the Sabbath. He stood up, took the scroll, and unrolled it (vv. 16–17). Later, the actions are exactly reversed: Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back, and sat down (v. 20). This detail highlights what happens in between: Jesus reads from Isaiah 61:1–3. Jesus declared that He has come to announce good news to the poor, imprisoned, blind, and oppressed. His message is freedom and release for those held in all kinds of bondage, and all this will be accomplished through the Spirit's anointing. When He said, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing," Jesus claimed that He is the answer to God's ancient promise. At first, the crowd seems accepting and astonished by their hometown boy (v. 22). Jesus, however, challenged their approval (v. 23).

Jesus recounted two incriminating stories from the time of the prophets Elijah and Elisha (vv. 24–27; cf. 1 Kings 17; 2 Kings 5:1–19). He cautioned their American Idol-like enthusiasm, suggesting that when they understood His deeper message and mission He might lose their votes. Will they be implicated when Jesus sets the captives free? Their praise and amazement quickly turned to fury (v. 28). The townspeople drove Jesus to the edge of town ready to kill Him, but Jesus escaped unhindered (vv. 29–30).

Apply the Word

Jesus announces freedom from all things that hold us captive: sin, disease, loneliness, mental illness, injustice, death. The Spirit of the Lord upon Jesus seals the liberation with power and authority, and this same Spirit who raised Christ from the dead lives in us (Rom. 8:11). You or someone you love may be imprisoned right now—physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. Today, hear the great news of total emancipation in Jesus Christ. Cry out to Him for healing and restoration and trust His Spirit in you for complete

redemption.

Luke 4:31-37; Revelation 4:1-8

I will sing praise to you with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel. - Psalm 71:22b

TODAY IN THE WORD

Diamond appraisers are trained to look for certain qualities in these precious stones, such as color and clarity. Although people say diamonds are white, many diamonds have varying degrees of yellowish color. Only very pure diamonds are truly colorless, and are obviously more rare and expensive. Very costly diamonds are nearly free from defect.

Diamonds can help us to understand the Lord's holiness—a quality of purity that has no blemish or defect. Yet because we are finite and affected by sin, we have a hard time understanding this moral perfection of the Lord.

The gospel accounts of our Lord's birth stress the role of the Holy Spirit surrounding this holy event (Matt. 1:20; Luke 1:35). And His life was such that the disciples recognized that Jesus was indeed the Holy One of God (John 6:69).

Interestingly, however, the demons uttered the sublime title "Holy One of God" when they saw Jesus. Luke 4 records an encounter with a demon-possessed man early in Jesus' public ministry (v. 31). People were marvelling at Jesus' teaching (v. 32). Most likely, though, they had no idea that the Holy One of Israel was standing in their midst.

But demons, although entirely evil, were compelled to acknowledge Jesus' holiness (vv. 33–34). With one command from Jesus, these demons were forced to leave the afflicted man, who was then fully restored without injury (v. 35).

This account reveals some powerful truths about the holiness of Jesus. First, the horrifying powers of darkness must acknowledge the holiness of our Lord. Second, these evil agents are completely powerless before the Holy One.

Evil is in every way opposite to the holiness of God. Perhaps this is the best way to understand our Lord's holiness—it is set apart from anything evil. All that is pure and clean is incomprehensible to darkness (John 1:5).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Whereas even the best diamonds reveal some level of imperfection under the expert's powerful microscope, there is absolutely nothing impure or discolored about the Lord.

LUKE 5

Luke 5:1–32

Dr. Amit Goffer of Israel has created a robotic suit that can help paralyzed individuals to walk. Created after Dr. Goffer himself was disabled in an accident, the ReWalk suit is a kind of exoskeleton with leg supports, motion sensors, and a computerized control box. According to one news report: "With the assistance of crutches, which offer balance and support, people paralyzed from the waist down can walk, bend, sit and even climb stairs when they wear the suit." Benefits are said to include better physical health and a stronger sense of personal dignity.

Jesus needed no modern technology to help the paralyzed man in today's reading walk. He had the power to heal at a word. What's more, He had the power to forgive sins. When the paralytic's friends lowered him through the roof, in fact, this was the issue Jesus dealt with first (v. 20). As the Pharisees recognized, Jesus was claiming to be God—because only God can forgive sin. When Jesus backed up His claim with divine healing power, what could they say? They could have praised God, as did others who were present (v. 26), but instead they took offense and continued to oppose Him. They saw not with eyes of faith, but with small minds and petty hearts (v. 30).

We see a variety of examples of Jesus' power in Luke 5. He healed a leper as well as the paralytic. He demonstrated power over nature by filling nets with fish. His teaching was powerful, as people crowded around to hear the word of God (v. 1) and the call to repentance (v. 32). He clearly believed in the power of prayer, for He cultivated it as a personal discipline that sustained His inner spiritual life (v. 16). He also showed spiritual power in calling individuals to follow Him, and it is notable that He chose not from among the ranks of religious leaders but instead called fishermen (vv. 10–11) and a tax collector (vv. 27–28). Unlike the Pharisees, these new disciples responded to the person of Christ in wholehearted faith—they "left everything and followed him."

Apply the Word

Where do you stand in relation to Jesus. Are you a Levi, a forgiven sinner eager to introduce others to Him? Are you a face in the crowd, attracted by His teachings or miracles but still undecided? Are you a skeptic, offended by the idea that Jesus is the only way

to God? Are you a fisherman, unsure of what this extraordinary Jesus person is going to say or do next, or why, but still ready to follow Him anywhere? Wherever you are, Jesus stands ready to welcome you as His follower.

Luke 5:12–14

The Home for Joy, a Christian ministry in Bangladesh, provides food, shelter, and job training for women who have been socially and economically ostracized either because of severe scarring from acid attacks or rape. Rejected for marriage, these women are vulnerable and impoverished in a cultural context where social and economic protection from men is required. Resources and support from The Home for Joy has provided healing and restoration to 28 women over the past ten years.

Jesus encountered a man covered with leprosy, a term that refers to various skin diseases considered highly infectious in the ancient world. According to Leviticus 13, if the priest identified something as a skin disease, the person was thereafter unclean. “He must live alone; he must live outside the camp” (Lev. 13:46). Thus, the leprosy man of Luke 5 was completely isolated spiritually from his community. Prohibited from all interaction with others, the man was socially and economically secluded as well. He was most likely poverty-stricken.

The leprosy man demonstrated humility, dependence, reverence, and belief in Jesus’ healing power. He called out, “Lord,” affirming even more than he actually knew about Jesus (vv. 12, 17). Jesus responded remarkably by touching the “unclean” man. Without reservation or fear of contamination, Jesus crossed traditional boundaries to heal this man.

Yet today’s text is more than a story of Jesus’ physical healing. It is a story of justice. Jesus pronounced the man “clean” and thus restored him spiritually, socially, and economically. This is indeed “good news to the poor” (4:18).

Jesus commanded the man to accord with the Levitical laws for cleansing and reentry into community life (Lev. 14:1–32), “as a testimony” to the priest (v. 14). First, a visit to the priest would confirm the healing and allow reintegration into spiritual, social, and economic life, much of which revolved around the temple. Second, the visit would testify to the power of the Lord at work.

Apply the Word - Following the healing of the leprosy man, Jesus steals away for private prayer (5:16). Jesus often set aside time for prayer and communion with the Father. The fruit of this time is intimacy with His Father, alignment with God’s mission, and strength for demanding ministry. One way we cultivate our relationship with our heavenly Father and have our strength renewed is through Bible study and prayer. In addition to your time with Today in the Word, pursue private time in prayer to the Lord.

Luke 5:33–6:16

“I used to believe in God,” wrote actor and comedian Ricky Gervais. “I loved Jesus. He was my hero.” But then one day his “cheeky” brother came in and asked their mother, “Why do you believe in God?” She panicked and could give no answer. Startled, young Ricky felt she must be hiding something, and very soon he concluded that Jesus was as big a fake as Santa Claus. “Within an hour, I was an atheist.” Now he tries to do the right thing and be a good person, but he thinks that God, heaven, and hell are security blankets for people who can’t handle the truth.

Rejection of Jesus and God’s truth is nothing new. Though it was present from the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, opposition becomes a major theme from this point forward in Luke.

Several conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees take center stage in today’s reading. The first involved a challenge to His disciples’ spirituality (5:33–39). The setting was Levi’s evangelistic dinner. Jesus answered their question about why He shared a meal and fellowship with sinners with a rebuke that implied they didn’t understand His ministry (5:30–32). Their pride stung, they attempted to regain face by asking Jesus why His disciples didn’t fast. Fasting is a spiritual discipline indicating devotion or self-denial, so the question was obviously an insult. Who does this rabbi think He is? they might have been thinking. Choosing such ridiculous disciples! Jesus’ answer was a wise surprise. Days of fasting would come, but the arrival of the Messiah meant the present time was one of joy and celebration (5:34–35).

Two additional conflicts involved challenges to Jesus’ righteousness (6:1–11). The Pharisees accused the disciples, then Jesus, of doing “work” on the Sabbath and thus breaking the fourth commandment. To count rubbing heads of grain together or speaking words of healing as “work” seems strange, but it broke their traditional regulations. Jesus responded with a biblical reference to David, identified Himself as “Lord of the Sabbath,” and asked a rhetorical question—about whether doing good was “against the law”—that exposed their spiritual blindness.

Apply the Word

If many of us are honest, the attitude of the Pharisees might feel familiar. It’s often easy to critique someone’s choice of friends or seeming lack of piety. We become indignant when others don’t follow our interpretation of what’s appropriate. When we are tempted to react like the Pharisees, we should search the Scriptures and pray, inviting the Holy Spirit to search our own hearts. We want to

follow Jesus in having the spiritual wisdom to know what is truly important and honoring to God.

LUKE 6

Luke 6:12-16

Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. - Ephesians 6:18

TODAY IN THE WORD

Abraham Lincoln once said, "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go."

Throughout history, believers have turned to prayer when faced with difficult decisions, just as Jesus Himself did. Although it was Jesus' habit to withdraw from the crowds to pray alone (see yesterday's study), the Gospels also link this custom to significant developments in Jesus' ministry. Today we see that Jesus prayed for a long time before He made one of the most important decisions during His incarnation—choosing His disciples.

Luke tells us that Jesus spent an entire night in prayer before making this decision, but Luke doesn't give us much more information than that. We don't know if there were other potential candidates that Jesus considered or how Jesus prayed for Judas, who would later betray Him. Luke simply tells us that after praying Jesus called all His disciples and selected the Twelve (v. 13). A very simple account of a very important event!

An entire night in prayer—why so much time spent in prayer for this one decision? Because so much was resting on it! The disciples were handpicked by Jesus as God's chosen instruments to carry on His work after His resurrection. These few men would be the ones who began the process of bringing the gospel of Jesus to the ends of the earth. Through these select individuals, the church would be established and nourished. Through the Holy Spirit, these disciples and the early Christians would indelibly change the course of human history forever!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

John 4:34 records Jesus saying "My food is to do the will of him who sent me." And Jesus discerned the Father's will through prayer.

Luke 6:12-16

Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. - Luke 6:12

TODAY IN THE WORD

How important is prayer? Philosophy professor Peter Kreeft said, "I strongly suspect that if we saw all the difference even the tiniest of our prayers make, and all the people those little prayers were destined to affect, and all the consequences of those prayers down through the centuries—we would be so paralyzed with awe at the power of prayer that we would be unable to get up off our knees for the rest of our lives."

This is one reason why Jesus prayed as an essential foundation in His spiritual life. He "often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Luke 5:16). He prayed after John baptized Him. He withdrew to pray after feeding the five thousand. He preached on true prayer in the Sermon on the Mount and taught His disciples how to pray (Matt. 6:5–15). He prayed with Peter, James, and John on the mountain before His Transfiguration. He prayed for Himself, His disciples, and all future believers (John 17). He agonized in prayer on the night of His betrayal. Prayer was a key part of His spiritual walk.

In today's reading, Jesus withdrew from the crowds, including both friends and enemies. He needed solitude. He withdrew to a mountainside, a beautiful natural setting. Being alone with God's creation often sets up helpful conditions for deeper prayer. Jesus did not want anything to distract from hearing the Father's voice.

In context, Jesus' mind was on the choosing of His twelve disciples. This was a major decision, and He wanted to know His Father's will about it. How strong was this desire? Strong enough to spend the entire night in prayer!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

How's your prayer life these days? Is it regular? Does it include praise, confession, and intercession? Is it a key part of your personal devotions? Do you keep a list? Have you tried various postures for praying? Do you pray back Scripture? Can you say that the attitude of your heart is to "pray continually" (1 Thess. 5:17)?

Luke 6:17–49

A recent book by Stan Guthrie gives readers an excellent overview of Christ's teachings. *All That Jesus Asks: How His Questions Can Teach and Transform Us* examines the nearly three hundred questions asked by Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels. Guthrie has organized these questions into 26 chapters and asserts that Jesus' questions reveal His priorities, what He wants us to believe, and how He wants us to live. If we take His questions seriously and measure our lives accordingly, we'll be challenged to a closer walk with Him.

Today's Scripture reading also gives an overview or quick tour of the teachings of Jesus. Up to this point, we have seen a few main themes—His identity as the Messiah and Son of God, His mission of saving the lost, His message of repentance and forgiveness, and His power as seen in His miracles. Now in the Sermon on the Plain—named this because Jesus “stood on a level place” (v. 17) and in contrast to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7—we get more details. Rather than being delivered on only one occasion, these were likely truths that Jesus stressed throughout His years of teaching.

Jesus reaffirmed the Golden Rule, saying, “with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (v. 38). But He also stressed going above and beyond the Law. For example, loving your neighbor isn't enough. Imitating God means we must love our enemies, pray for those who mistreat us, and go the extra mile in honor of God's mercy (vv. 27–36).

Jesus also frequently reversed the world's ways of looking at things. For example, the “poor” (or humble) would inherit the kingdom of God, while the “rich” (and proud) are condemned (vv. 20, 24). Qualities that God blesses include humility, righteousness, and endurance of hardship and persecution, whereas those who put their hope in material and temporal things are warned that such things cannot satisfy. The only sure foundation for a righteous life is obedience, that is, putting into practice the words of Christ (vv. 46–49).

Apply the Word

You might be interested in the book featured in today's introduction: *All That Jesus Asks: How His Questions Can Teach and Transform Us*, by Stan Guthrie (Baker Books, 2010). It can be purchased online or at your local Christian bookstore. Guthrie wrote in the acknowledgments: “No one benefits more from a book than the one who writes it, and I am no exception. Walking with Jesus as he asks his questions is the most exhilarating spiritual journey I have ever undertaken.”

Louis Zamperini, a Japanese prisoner of war, endured torture from his captor, “the Bird.” Zamperini dreamed of killing the Bird, but when he became a Christian after World War II, he forgave him and sent him this letter: “Thanks to a confrontation with God, I committed my life to Christ. Love has replaced the hate I had for you. Christ said, ‘Forgive your enemies and pray for them.’ I now would hope that you would also become a Christian.”

Luke 6:24-26 Philippians 4:10-19;

The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, and he who wins souls is wise. - Proverbs 11:30

TODAY IN THE WORD

Charlotte Moon, better known as Lottie, was a missionary in China for thirty-nine years. Her appeals for “more laborers” helped many people see God's vision for world missions, and inspired others to commit themselves to this work. In 1887, Lottie Moon sent this challenge back home: “Where is the silver and the gold that should be in the Lord's treasury to send out those men and women who are asking to be sent to the heathen? Alas! Alas! Some are spending in selfish indulgences. So these heathen souls go down to death without ever having heard the name of Jesus.”

People don't write and talk like this anymore—but maybe someone needs to. The basic needs and challenges of God's work around the world haven't changed since the days of pioneer missionaries such as Lottie Moon. Today we want to look at another side of the topic we discussed yesterday, which is the choice we have in the way we use our finances and other gifts.

Before we go any further, let's remind ourselves of the fact that as Christians, we are stewards, or managers, of God's possessions. The only question is what kind of job we will do. Today's readings give us the contrast between living for our own comfort and using our money to help win souls.

The believers at Philippi were a great example of the latter lifestyle. They were among the poor Christians of Macedonia who gave so generously to help their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem (see the June 10 study).

Paul also tells us they supported his ministry even when nobody else did. He was happy to tell them they would have spiritual reward credited to their account in heaven (Phil. 4:17).

Jesus addressed those on the other end of the spectrum. It's the implication in Luke 6 that makes His words so penetrating. One Bible teacher points out that in general, the rich people mentioned in Luke were those who chose present comfort over future

blessing, and ignored God and spiritual realities (see Luke 12:16-21 for a good example). Jesus also implies that their wealth, symbolized by laughter, was gained at the expense of others (Lk. 6:25).

The conclusion is that we can either spend money on ourselves or determine to be ""rich toward God"" (Luke 12:21).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Are you happy with the amount of your time, talent, and treasure that is being invested in God's work around the world?

That's an intensely personal issue between you and the Lord—but we can offer a few questions that will help you resolve it. Does your giving to God's work represent the tithe, the one-tenth of your income that is a basic standard for giving? Do you carry a burden for lost people, whether at home or a world away? Are you sharing the gospel as God gives you opportunities?

Luke 6:27-28 Matthew 5:43-48

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. - Luke 6:27-28

TODAY IN THE WORD

During the Civil War, a woman who was a staunch supporter of the Union once chided Abraham Lincoln for speaking too kindly about the southern states. The woman said that he should focus on destroying his enemies instead of being nice. Lincoln responded, "Why madam, do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?"

Loving your enemies doesn't come naturally, humanly speaking, and that's the point of this portion of the Sermon on the Mount. Even though saddled with a sin nature, people tend to repay love with love. Loving people who love you is no extraordinary achievement. Yesterday we saw how Christ commanded us to love people in need, even complete strangers from different walks of life. But in Matthew 5, Jesus took the command to love one step further. "Love your enemies" is a concept so contrary to our natures, most people don't want to consider it.

The thought of serving or showing love to someone who hates us can make our blood pressure rise, but Jesus' statement about God puts things into perspective. Think about how many enemies of God inhabit the earth on any given day. Now consider how much God has given each one of them. The shining sun and the provision of rain are just two basic examples from a world of grace that God makes available to all people. If the Creator of all—who has every right to withhold every good thing from us as disobedient, rebellious creatures, can show us love and withhold His wrath instead—how can we justify our failure to love our enemies?

Twice Jesus connected loving our enemies with being like God. The term "sons" in verse 45 speaks to the way that we can resemble God as a child resembles his father. And in verse 48, Jesus singled out the quality required to produce such resemblance—perfection. God alone is perfect. Only He can enable us to love in this way.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If you don't label anyone you know personally as an "enemy," consider a broader scope of the world. Do any political groups make you angry? Maybe someone or some issue in the news draws your ire. Take two steps to show love to these "enemies." When something you see in the media angers you, pray with love for the people involved. Second, if the topic comes up in conversation, take special consideration to treat with respect and love people who take a dissenting opinion.

Luke 6:27-36

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort. - 2 Corinthians 1:3

TODAY IN THE WORD

Justice appeared to be served, and Nathan "Boo" Herring got what he deserved. The 19-year-old man from Steubenville, Ohio, received a sentence of two life terms without parole for his role in the murders of two college students, Aaron Land and Brian Muha. At the sentencing, Brian's mother Rachel spoke.

"If you hadn't done this, I would have my Brian and you would have your freedom," she said calmly. "But losing your freedom is not as bad as losing your soul." She then asked Herring to devote the rest of his years on earth to good before blessing him and assuring him she would pray for him.

When Jesus spoke of loving your enemies, could He possibly have meant forgiving and praying for the murderer of your child? This

sounds impossible—and it is, without the power of the Holy Spirit. But because the Spirit bears fruit in us, Jesus could indeed expect such a supernatural response of kindness and goodness. This is the fruit of the Spirit we are considering today.

Our society associates kindness and goodness with sweet little old ladies and children who play nicely with others. While good behavior and graciousness are certainly admirable traits, the fruit of the Spirit goes well beyond courtesy. Jesus is talking about exercising kindness and goodness to people who hate you, curse you, mistreat you (vv. 27–28). As anyone who has experienced a slight from someone else knows, we naturally want to respond to others in the same way that they’ve treated us. What gives Jesus the right to ask us to behave differently?

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Responding with kindness and goodness isn’t easy—if it were, it wouldn’t be a fruit of the Holy Spirit

Luke 6:27–36

Kindness: Mercy for the Undeserving

Kindness, when it’s synonymous with mercy (and directed toward those who don’t deserve it), reveals God’s grace in an unparalleled way. As we’ve studied the fruit of the Spirit this month, we’ve learned that Christian virtue is not a matter of temperament or personality. It is evidence of God’s Spirit indwelling the human heart. What else, for example, apart from spiritual regeneration, motivates a person to show kindness to someone who is ungrateful or evil?

Notice that Jesus uses words like “credit” to talk about the implications of kindness. The English Standard Version translates this as “benefit.” Jesus sounds like an economic advisor, telling his client where to invest his money for the greatest return. And in fact, this is exactly what He intends to imply. At the end of the passage, Jesus talks about reward, a heavenly reward, that awaits those of us who act for reasons other than self-interest.

In a worldly sense, it is to our “credit” or “benefit” to be kind to those who have something to offer us or have the ability to repay, whether personally or professionally. But to “waste” kindness on those who not only are incapable of returning our generosity but who may even spurn our efforts? This seems unbelievably foolish. So then, is God, who shows such extravagant kindness to us!

Apply the Word

On whom would your kindness feel wasted? Your boss, who demands more of you and never appreciates what you’ve done? Your spouse, who doesn’t contribute his or her “fair share?” Your neighbor, who’s spiteful and selfish? Show God’s kindness to them this week in a practical way, remembering that God shows you kindness you do not deserve.

Luke 6:27-28 Matthew 5:43-48;

Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. - Luke 6:28

TODAY IN THE WORD

Even from upstairs, Mildred could hear the commotion. The ministry offices were usually quiet at this time in the afternoon, so the man shouting downstairs sounded especially loud. As Mildred listened, she realized that this man was very angry and violent. As she crept down the stairs, she saw a man wielding a baseball bat cursing her fellow workers.

For a few minutes, she watched in horrified silence. Then quietly, yet deliberately, Mildred walked straight towards the man, put her arms around him, and started praying for him. At first, he was so stunned, he didn’t know what to do. Then he began to cry. Finally, he looked at her and said, “I just had to know if anybody really loved me.”

Today’s passages may not have been in Mildred’s mind when she acted as she did, but they no doubt filled her heart. Loving our enemies doesn’t come naturally. Jesus was well aware of that. Conventional wisdom during Jesus’ day said that enemies were to be hated, or at least avoided. Even in our day, some children are taught from a very early age to hate other groups of people. Thus, Jesus’ command, “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you,” was—and still is—radical.

This command involves going beyond natural affection. It’s easy to love those who are nice to us. This command also urges us to go beyond “what everyone else is doing.” Notice that Jesus followed this command with a reason—so that we might become children of our Father in heaven (v. 45). In other words, we love our enemies so that we might act in accordance with our true nature as children of God.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Praying for our enemies has a way of protecting our own hearts at the same time from hardening. Something releases inside when

we bring our persecutors before the Lord in prayer. There are many examples of this throughout the church's history, but two especially inspiring accounts involve Corrie ten Boom, who prayed for her Nazi captors, and Ruby Bridges, who prayed for those who hated her because of her skin color. Books or videos about either one can be found in your library or bookstore

Luke 6:46-49

TODAY IN THE WORD

History records that the incomparable military conqueror Alexander the Great once came to a walled city and demanded that its inhabitants surrender immediately. The king appeared on the ramparts above Alexander and scoffed, "We are protected within these walls. Furthermore, we have your small company of soldiers vastly outnumbered. Why should we surrender to you?"

As the story goes, Alexander ordered his men to march straight toward a nearby cliff. In shocked disbelief, the king watched as one by one, Alexander's battle-hardened warriors stepped off the mountainous ledge and hurtled hundreds of feet to their deaths.

After ten soldiers had died, Alexander ordered his men to cease. He then shouted to the king: "That is why you should surrender." The king did so immediately.

We might not give such unflinching obedience to an earthly king, but our Heavenly King deserves this kind of devotion. In Luke 6, Jesus makes it clear that obedience is not optional for believers. To call Jesus "Lord" means that we must obey Him (v. 46). If we have no intention of doing the Master's will, we should not claim to be His followers. Obedience involves first hearing the commands of Christ and then putting them into practice (v. 47).

When we live in such a compliant manner, we find security. Our lives are like a "well-built" home (v. 48). On the other hand, when we arbitrarily pick and choose which commands of Christ we will submit to, our lives become shaky and susceptible to destruction (v. 49). Obedience to Christ begins where we live. He must be Lord of the everyday, the mundane, the familiar. And that's where it is often the toughest!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Obedience is one of those either/or values. Either we do what Christ tells us, or we refuse. There is no third category. A person cannot be "mostly" obedient.

Listen to the promise given to Joshua, another great military leader: "Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful" (Joshua 1:).

LUKE 7

Luke 7

Kate and David Ogg grieved. Last March in Australia, Kate gave birth prematurely to twins, and while Emily survived, doctors were unable to revive her twin, Jamie. He was declared dead. Kate and David held the boy's lifeless body close, cuddling him. She unwrapped him from his blanket and held him against her skin. Then a miracle happened. After two hours of being talked to and touched, little Jamie began to breathe. He opened his eyes. He began to nurse. He moved his head. The doctors couldn't believe it—the "dead" baby was alive!

The Ogg family's joy helps us understand the joy felt by the widow in today's passage (vv. 11–17). Widows had no social standing in that day—and to be a childless widow, well, that was the lowest of the low. Why would an up-and-coming young rabbi waste His time on such a person? To show God's love and power, that's why. Jesus' "heart went out to her." By raising her son from the dead, He performed His most powerful miracle so far. The people saw God's covenant love in this deed, and the word that "God has come to help his people" spread quickly.

Three other improbable events in this chapter also testify to Jesus' identity as the Messiah and Son of God. First, tremendous faith was ascribed not to a Jew but to a Roman centurion (v. 9). The man showed great humility and spiritual understanding in his approach to Jesus, and as a result his servant was healed. Second, doubt was expressed not by a Pharisee but by John the Baptist, the forerunner himself. He sent two followers to get a definitive answer, showing that no one is immune to doubt. Jesus gave him what he asked for (v. 22) and honored his ministry (v. 28).

Third and finally, respect and honor were paid to Jesus not by His own disciples but by a former prostitute. She anointed Him with expensive perfume, an act of respect and worship and an implied prayer for forgiveness. Jesus granted her prayer and taught His listeners a powerful lesson (vv. 47–50).

Apply the Word

Be encouraged—what seems improbable or impossible is possible with the Lord! Are you, like a widow whose only son is dead, in a desperate situation? God is the giver of hope! Are you, like John the Baptist, a committed believer going through a crisis of doubt? God is the encourager of faith! Are you, like the sinful woman, someone who wonders whether God can ever forgive the horrible things you've done? God loved you so much that He sent His only Son to die for your sins!

Luke 7:11–17

Unanticipated Resurrection: A Grieving Widowed Mother

God has come to help his people. - Luke 7:16

Steven Frayne has captivated audiences on both stage and screen, especially in his native Great Britain. Better known by his performing name, Dynamo, Frayne is considered a world-class magician and illusionist. People have been shocked and awed by feats including turning snow into diamonds, levitating himself and others, and walking across the River Thames barefoot.

Shock and awe would also have been the response of the crowd who watched Jesus raise to life a young man who had died. He was the only son of his widowed mother. As his corpse was being carried out of town for burial, Jesus approached the pallbearers. When Jesus commanded the dead body to get up, the man sat up and began to talk. Those gathered could not believe what they were seeing! They knew this young man was dead; they were on their way to the burial when instead a praise session erupted. The man's mother joined the other witnesses in praising God for her son's restoration.

Throughout human history, human beings had battled against the power of death, and lost. And yet the holy glimpse of resurrection experienced by this grieving mother and her son, was a foretaste of what was to come in the saving resurrection of Jesus Himself. Her response, which was joined by the voices of other witnesses, demonstrates how she understood what had just happened: "God has come to help his people" (v. 16). Jesus showed compassion in His tender words to this widow and showed power in His mighty work of restoring this son to life. He is indeed the incarnate presence of God who has come to help His people.

Apply the Word - God is not the cosmic magician in the sky, doing tricks and illusions to show off His power. He loves His creation and extends mercy and kindness. He cares about our hurts and sorrows. If you are grieving over a situation today, take hope and confidence from His Word: "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7).

Luke 7:16–23

Bodies Made Well As a Sign of the Messiah

A popular television show, *Say Yes to the Dress*, films brides-to-be as they search for the perfect wedding dress. The bridal salon attendant, hoping to close a sale, will notice when the woman appears to love a particular gown and will ask, "Is this The One? Is this your dress?" Her entourage of friends and family, as well as viewers at home, hold their breath waiting for answer. Will she say this is the one perfect gown of her dreams? Will she say yes to the dress?

After John the Baptist had been imprisoned, he heard reports from his disciples that Jesus' popularity was growing and His message about the inbreaking of a new kingdom was spreading. Though John had long ago recognized that his cousin had been designated by God, he now wanted to be sure that Jesus was in fact the One, the longed-for Messiah. Curious, yet stuck behind prison bars, he sent messengers to find out.

If the bride-to-be declares that this is not the right dress, she can keep looking for something else. In much the same way, if the person in question—Jesus—doesn't behave like the long-awaited One, then, the searcher can keep looking for the authentic fulfillment of God's promise. So when John's disciples arrived, they asked Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?" (v. 18).

Rather than insisting, "I'm the One! I'm the One!" Jesus pointed to the works He had been doing. He was saying in essence, "Tell John that those whose bodies and lives were broken are made well." The report would have evoked, both for John and his disciples, the rich images Isaiah used to describe God's suffering servant, the "one who was to come" (see Isa. 61:1–2). The restoration of physical bodies was the sign that Jesus was, indeed, the One God had sent!

Apply the Word

We can look back to Jesus' first-century healings to recognize His power, and we can witness it in the lives of our neighbors today. Where do you see Jesus' active power to restore lives at work in the world today? Deliverance from addiction, healing from disease, and restoration of relationships are all part of the work of the Lord.

Luke 7:36-50

The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins. - Mark 2:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

Ann Judson, the pioneer missionary who left behind a comfortable life in America to go to Burma with her husband Adoniram (see the February 4 study), once wrote to her sister, ""A little sacrifice for the cause of Christ is not worth naming, and I feel it a privilege, of which I am entirely undeserving, to have had it in my power to sacrifice my all for Him who hesitated not to lay down His life for sinners.""

Any sacrifice we can make has to seem small compared to what Jesus Christ has done for us. No sinner who has come to Him in repentance and faith has ever been turned away. Jesus' compassion was always extended to those who sought forgiveness.

The story of the sinful woman and the self-righteous Pharisee is a perfect example of Jesus' infinite compassion for lost people. There are several amazing things about this incident.

The first is that this woman, despite her soiled reputation, felt safe in approaching Jesus to demonstrate repentance and sorrow for her sin. She was taking a huge risk of rejection and humiliation, should Jesus refuse to have anything to do with her, or hold her up to ridicule. It's obvious she would have received nothing but scorn from Simon, Jesus' host.

It's also amazing to see Jesus' complete composure as this woman wept on His feet, kissed them, and poured perfume on them. There isn't another man on earth who could have dealt with this potentially embarrassing and awkward situation the way Jesus did.

Simon the Pharisee's lack of passion for lost souls was mirrored in his treatment of Jesus. Simon's failure to provide the customary courtesies for his guest betrayed a low sense of value for Jesus and His mission of seeking and saving the lost. And it revealed Simon's pride of heart that made him feel superior to a ""sinner.""

What a moment it must have been when Jesus forgave this woman her many sins! It left the other dinner guests in amazement. The woman left free of her sin, declared righteous in God's sight--the act of God's grace that Paul would later call justification by faith.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Have you ever glanced at someone, perhaps on the street--and then stopped to really look at that person?

When you do that, you begin to see things you didn't notice at first glance. That's what we need to do with people on the spiritual level. Simon only saw a sinner; Jesus saw a sinner who was eager for salvation. Seeing people through Jesus' eyes can make all the difference. Ask God to help you do that with the people around you. But be careful: seeing people the way Jesus sees them will intensify your passion for souls!

LUKE 8

Luke 8

Sweet potatoes might be an ancient solution to the modern problem of hunger. They have been grown as a food crop for more than 5,000 years. Ninety-five percent of the global sweet potato crop is currently grown in developing countries, where they rank fifth in importance as a food source. Adaptable and hardy, as well as rich in carbohydrates and vitamin A, sweet potatoes have often served as lifesavers in times of famine. The American Society for Horticultural Science recently published research that will help small-scale farmers in developing countries raise even more of this valuable crop.

Planting sweet potatoes can help fight world hunger, and planting the seed of the gospel can help fight world sin. The Parable of the Sower, the first of 29 parables recorded by Luke, is well placed in his Gospel.

The narrative to this point has revealed who Jesus was, why He came, and the central themes of His message. Jesus had already encountered the responses described in the parable (vv. 11-15). First is unbelief, as the devil "takes away the word from their hearts." Second, people accept it—if it's convenient. "They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away." The third response is stunted growth. "As they go on their way, they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature." And the fourth response to the seed of the gospel is obedient faith. They "hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop." These four are meant to be illustrative rather than exhaustive. That is, they do not cover all possible scenarios, but rather represent a spectrum of possible responses to Jesus.

The rest of the chapter gives us plenty of reasons to respond to Christ in faith. We can trust in the One who rules over nature and is able to calm storms and heal diseases. We can trust in the One who rules over the supernatural world and is able to cast out

demons. We can trust in the One who reverses death itself and raises a dead girl to life. If we “hear God’s word and put it into practice” (v. 21), this is the One who counts us as family!

Apply the Word

Time and relationships are key to discerning responses to the gospel. A seed is planted, and then we must wait to see what happens. For example, Nicodemus was a Pharisee, but he sought deeper spiritual truths and eventually accepted Jesus’ explanation of spiritual rebirth. This should encourage us in our own witness. The Spirit might be working in the heart of that friend or neighbor who seems so resistant to the gospel. Keep praying for them!

Luke 8:1–3

An Unlikely Follower: Mary Magdalene

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

A popular advertisement technique features dramatic “before” and “after” pictures. One touts balding men who’ve “regrown” thick hair. An ad for a weight-management product shows a three-hundred-pound woman who’s now half her previous size. Another shows a teen’s face covered in acne until he uses the advertised product. In the “after” picture he’s been treated—and then airbrushed—to perfection. Advertisers use the method because it touches something in us that longs for transformation.

One of the most dramatic before-and-after stories in the Gospels is the transformation of Mary Magdalene. When Jesus encountered her she was possessed by seven demons! (Mark 16:9). Considered unclean by those in her community, she would have been marginalized both socially and spiritually. After Jesus drove the demons out of her, Mary became one of His most devoted followers. In fact, mentioned in the Gospels more often than many of the twelve disciples, she’s the only one described by all four Gospel writers as the first person to bear witness to the resurrection. Mary was one of several women who supported Jesus with the financial resources she had, and she stuck with Him until the end: present at the cross, the tomb and—joyfully!—at Jesus’ resurrection.

Like so many who encountered Jesus during His time on earth, Mary’s life was dramatically transformed. Having been touched by Him, her life and her resources were given over to Jesus’ ministry in the world. Her “after” picture showed a woman who was growing to look more and more like her Lord. In this respect, Mary Magdalene’s journey becomes a template for all those who follow Jesus today.

Apply the Word

Encountering Jesus transformed the life of Mary Magdalene, and it is meant to transform lives today as well. What is your “before” picture: who you were, or would be today, without Christ? How has Jesus transformed your life? In what ways is He still working to conform you to His image?

Luke 8:19–21

Being in Jesus’ Family: James, the Brother of Jesus

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. James 1:22

In some families, sports provide the bond that ties a family together. They enjoy playing, coaching, and watching sports together. The family of professional football quarterbacks Archie, Peyton, and Eli Manning is one example. In other families, music is the shared interest. Family members sing and perform and compose and direct. The Von Trapp family, whose lives were depicted in the celebrated musical *The Sound of Music*, was a family like this. What, though, did it mean to be a member of Jesus’ family? More importantly, how did Jesus define who was included in His family?

At the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, after calling His disciples, Jesus’ family did not yet understand the mission for which He had been called. They didn’t understand His obedience to His Father. In fact, they thought He was out of His mind! (see Mark 3:21). The same evening, gesturing toward the crowd gathered to hear His teaching, Jesus articulated to those present that His “mother” and “brothers” were those who did the will of God. It was a theme that would run throughout Jesus’ ministry (Luke 8:19–21).

At least one of Jesus’ halfbrothers, the son of Joseph and Mary, heard and implemented this important teaching. James was the author of the epistle by the same name, and he did become a disciple of his brother. He heard and internalized and practiced the message he had received from Jesus about doing the will of God. After Jesus’ death and resurrection, James wrote, “Whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it—not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it—they will be blessed in what they do” (James 1:25). Those who belong to Jesus’ family will take God at His word.

Apply the Word - The fullness of grace that Jesus offers includes the power to respond in faith and obedience to God's Word. Jesus was less concerned with the label a person wore—Jew, Gentile, Samaritan—than with their response to His Father. Spend time in prayer for people God has placed in your life. Ask the Lord to show you how you can follow Him and do His will.

Luke 8:26–39

Sent to Share Good News: A Man Possessed by a Demon

Return home and tell how much God has done for you. Luke 8:39

In 1988 Dave Dravecky was at the top of his game. He was a pitcher in the starting rotation for the San Francisco Giants. Later that year, though, Dave learned that he had cancer, and half of the deltoid muscles in his pitching arm had to be removed. Doctors predicted that he would never pitch again, but he was back on the mound a year later. Five days after his comeback, however, Dave's arm snapped in two while he was pitching. To prevent the recurrence of cancer, the arm was amputated. In the wake of this tragedy, Dravecky, a man of faith, began to travel the country sharing with audiences what he had learned.

Another suffering man, saved by Jesus, also shared with audiences how his life had been redeemed by Jesus. Running naked and mad, this man had been cut off from his community and was living among the tombs near his hometown in the region of the Gerasenes. He met Jesus at the shore, while possessed by demons, Jesus delivered him from the demons that tortured him. The first witnesses who ran to tell others were those who had been tending the pigs nearby that became the collateral damage in the man's redemption!

Curious folks from town came to see the spectacle for themselves. Unlike the Samaritans, however, who came to faith after hearing the testimony of the Samaritan woman, these people asked Jesus to leave their region. The healed man begged to join Him and His disciples, but Jesus had a different plan for him: stay put and tell others what happened. With transformation came the responsibility to share good news with others. Telling others about the marvelous works of God in Jesus is the natural overflow of a life that has been redeemed.

Apply the Word - Can you name what Jesus has done for you? Is it something you've shared with others? You don't need to have a testimony that includes cancer or demon possession in order to be used by God to touch the lives of others. Today, reflect on how your life has been transformed by Jesus and purpose to share this good news with someone.

Luke 8:41–56

Effortlessly Redeemed: The Daughter of Jairus

Her spirit returned, and at once she stood up. Luke 8:55

Advances in modern technology enabled us to do many things: to communicate better and in more ways, to contact more people, and to obtain easily all the information we need from many different sources. The possibilities of the digital world can create a false sense of power. It seems we can achieve anything, there's no limit to human progress and creativity.

But when we lift our eyes off our screens and ponder the reality of life, death, salvation, we are reminded again and again that ultimate power is in the hands of God. Only through Christ can we come from death to life. It's the encounter with Jesus that truly changes everything, and this month we'll look at people's encounters with Jesus in the New Testament.

The Gospel of Luke tells the story of a father who begged Jesus to heal his daughter. Despite being pushed and pulled by others' needs, Jesus made His way to the little girl who had been suffering with illness. But before Jesus could arrive there, this little girl was pronounced dead. After reassuring her desperate and brokenhearted parents, Jesus touched and healed the girl, raising her to new life. The little girl came from death to life. Her life, and the lives of her parents, were changed forever.

Too often we can be tempted to behave as if it is our movement toward Jesus that saves us. But not this girl. No doubt, for the rest of her life she remembered the precarious experience of sickness and death. Her parents would remind her that there had been nothing that anyone was able to do to restore her, except for Jesus. By no human effort or will of her own, Jesus came to her and raised her to new life. Graciously, this is how Jesus operates! He extends grace when we are still bound by the powers of sin and death.

Apply the Word - Have you been tempted to believe that Jesus would touch you if you could just exert the right amount of prayer or energy or effort? What a burden! Know that Jesus is always moving toward us. It's how He operates. Jesus is faithful to move toward us, and we meet Him in our darkest moments, like the girl who received His touch at death's door.

Luke 8:42–48

My mood has become as hard as my surroundings and as lifeless and empty. It seems nothing can move me. . . . I realize the isolation, pain and heartache that must grip so many other women that live here—all of us seeing the same scene day after day. “Here” for poet Rhonda Leland is Valley State Prison for Women in central California, and her experience is shared by “many other women” who live imprisoned physically, spiritually, and socially.

We meet one such woman in Luke 8. She lived in a particular kind of prison, since she suffered from chronic bleeding for 12 years. In first-century Palestine, this meant that she was “unclean,” and like the leprous man from yesterday’s reading, she was cut off from society spiritually, socially, and economically.

Picture Jesus and His disciples walking through the streets of the town, surrounded by such a large crowd that Jesus was nearly crushed (v. 42). Luke points out one unnamed woman from among the multitude. Her condition elicits our compassion: continuous, incurable hemorrhaging (v. 43). Like the leprous man, she seemed to recognize Jesus’ power. Perhaps the news of Him had spread. Unlike the leprous man, the woman tried to remain incognito—but not for long. Her courageous touch of Jesus’ cloak healed her immediately, and Jesus knew power had left Him (vv. 44, 46).

Jesus is more than a magic healer. He is the long-awaited King and Savior of the whole world. By asking the woman to identify herself, Jesus invited her into a personal encounter with Himself. Though no one answered, and Peter thought the question wholly nonsensical, Jesus persisted. Compelled by fear and faith, the woman fell at Jesus’ feet and disclosed her identity and intentions (v. 47). Jesus’ response proclaimed freedom for the imprisoned woman (v. 48; Luke 4:18). The woman once unnamed is now called “Daughter.” Jesus not only healed her body, but He also brought her back into the community of God and into relationship with Him. He turns her “isolation, pain, and heartache” into true freedom and peace.

Apply the Word Do you have eyes like Peter or like Jesus? In the crowds surrounding you—family, coworkers, neighbors, church community, friends, and even strangers—there are people suffering in their own kinds of prisons. Ask God to open your eyes to see them. Invite the Holy Spirit to minister to them through you, to show you how to proclaim the freedom of Christ into their lives. One idea is to invite a friend to study the Gospel of Luke with you. T

LUKE 9

Luke 9

While it’s easy to focus on Jesus’ dramatic miracles and confrontations with the Pharisees, His most significant ministry—apart from our salvation—is found in His relational mentoring and teaching of His twelve closest disciples. A classic article in *Discipleship Journal* titled “If Jesus Led Your Small Group” suggests key principles based on how Jesus led His own “small group” of unlikely future church leaders. These principles include preparation or setting aside dedicated time, modeling what you say, room for questions, a safe atmosphere or forgiveness for failure, mutual friendship (rather than know-it-all authoritarianism), and flexibility.

We see these principles in today’s reading. Luke 9 seems to focus more on these personal dimensions of Jesus’ ministry. When He sent out the Twelve, it’s as if He were saying, “Here, you take the wheel.” This was a powerful and encouraging experience for them, so much so that Jesus afterward took them on a ministry debriefing retreat. When the crowds interrupted, He was disappointed that the disciples seemed to doubt He could do something as simple as provide lunch. His miracle told them once again that He was the Son of God. The leaders and crowds had varying opinions, but He wanted His disciples to have no doubts about His identity. With divine help (Matt. 16:17), Peter boldly declared that Jesus was “God’s Messiah” (v. 20).

Discipleship is a journey filled with highs and lows. There are moments of exhilarating insight, as in Peter’s confession. There are moments of beholding God’s glory, as at the Transfiguration. There are also times of shame and suffering as we live counter to the world’s priorities. Giving one’s life for Christ’s sake is part of what it means to be His disciple (vv. 23–26, 57–62). Following Him must be our absolutely top priority. Thankfully, it’s about God’s strength, not our own, for there will be times when we fail (as when the disciples couldn’t cast out an evil spirit) or embarrass ourselves (as when they argued about who was the greatest). Once we’ve put our hand to the plow, though, there’s no turning back!

Apply the Word

It is possible to understand some spiritual truths but remain clueless about others. Though Peter knew exactly who Jesus was, he didn’t grasp what Jesus told him about the suffering and death He would soon undergo (vv. 22, 44–45). Though the disciples had experienced Jesus’ power, they didn’t grasp that this power was for love and service, not conquest or revenge (vv. 51–56). We must trust that God is the One who enlightens our spiritual understanding at just the right times

Luke 9:28-36

We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only. - John 1:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

Perhaps you've heard stories about believers who are just about to die, and who hear heavenly music or see a bright light. Unfortunately popular interest in "near-death" experiences might make us suspicious of some such accounts. But there are numerous accounts of Christians who have somehow glimpsed eternity just before they entered it.

In some respects, the Transfiguration is like these accounts. When still on earth, and while He was headed for the Cross, Jesus stepped back into eternity and was manifest in full glory before a small number of His disciples. This amazing event took place just after Peter had confessed that Jesus was the Messiah (v. 20). You may also recall that just after Peter's confession, Jesus told His disciples that He must suffer and die, but that He would be raised from the dead on the third day (v. 22). About eight days later, Jesus was transfigured.

Just before the event of the Transfiguration, Luke tells us that Jesus was praying (v. 29). Jesus didn't go up the mountain to be transfigured—He went up the mountain to pray, as was His custom. And it was as He was talking with the Father that the Father revealed to Him and the disciples a taste of what was to come. Yes, the Son of Man had to suffer and die, but on the other side of that event was unspeakable glory. This pointed toward to Jesus' Second Coming.

Although all the Gospel writers show the link between prayer and significant events in Jesus' life, Luke's Gospel is notable in this regard. For example, Luke records many of the prayers surrounding Jesus' birth. Luke tells us that Jesus spent the night praying before choosing the Twelve (Luke 6:12). And Luke notes that Jesus was praying when He was transfigured.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If Jesus, fully human and fully God, needed to bring everything to His Father in prayer, how much more do we need to do the same thing? His life encourages us to bring every decision, every dream, every trial before Him in prayer.

Luke 9:57-62

No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God. - Luke 9:62

TODAY IN THE WORD

"The way of the Cross," wrote James Montgomery Boice in *The Heart of the Cross*, "is about Christian discipleship, and the problem is that there is very little actual following of Jesus Christ in our time. Discipleship means forsaking everything in order to follow Christ. But for many of today's Christians it is the case that while there is much talk about Christ and even much furious activity that is supposedly done in His name, there is actually very little following of Christ Himself. That means there is very little genuine Christianity."

Strong words! And a bold, biblical challenge to us. Do we take today's verse seriously? We begin today the second major subtopic in our study of following Christ, examining for about a week His interactions with disciples and friends.

The basic lesson here was simple: Choose discipleship, do it, live it, don't look back. Remember Lot's wife! There can be nothing halfway about it—it's all or nothing. Following Jesus must be an all-consuming priority and passion, or it's not really following at all.

Three brief encounters illustrated, by contrast, this principle. The first person announced his willingness to follow, but Jesus questioned the depth of his commitment. Was he ready for hardship? Could he handle being "homeless"? The second person was invited to follow, but he hedged. His answer indicated he wanted to wait until his father died. He was unwilling to give up the good (honoring parents) for the best (God's kingdom). The third person was willing to follow . . . later. He had some things to take care of first. His old way of life still claimed his attention.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

To close your devotional time today, sing several songs about discipleship and following Christ.

Possibilities include hymns such as "Where He Leads Me" and "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," as well as choruses including "I Have Decided to Follow Jesus" and "God Will Make a Way."

LUKE 10

Luke 10

A hit-and-run driver struck a 78-year-old man on a busy city street in Hartford, Connecticut. Car after car drove by the injured man, and bystanders gawked. Several people did call 911, but a surveillance camera captured most people's unwillingness to get involved or help. The same month, again captured by video, a woman who had been waiting for a bed for 24 hours in a Brooklyn hospital

collapsed on the floor, writhing in pain. Staff and patients in the waiting room noticed her convulsions but made no move to help. When someone did check on her over an hour later, it was too late—the woman was dead.

Whether in ancient or modern times, it seems that the sacrificial love of the Good Samaritan remains the exception rather than the rule. Jesus shared this parable about truly loving one's neighbor in response to a test question from a religious leader about the greatest commandment (vv. 25–37).

The story teaches many things about love. Love is not predictable—those who might be expected to obey the commandment (two religious leaders) did not do so. Love crosses boundaries of ethnic and cultural prejudice, as the Samaritan helped the Jew. Love goes the extra mile and makes a personal investment, seen in the ways the Samaritan cared with his own resources for the robbery victim. Love loves when no one is watching, on a lonely road, not for human praise.

Jesus' story illuminated the true nature of love, exhorted His hearers to love in this manner, and revealed the deep love and mercy of God. The "neighbor," after all, turned out to be the one who showed mercy to the helpless man in need, just as God has done for us (vv. 36–37).

God's merciful love enables another kind of love, that of friendship between human beings and God (John 15:15). Mary was one of Jesus' closest friends, and at the end of the chapter she showed her devotion by choosing "what is better," that is, to sit quietly and listen to her friend and Savior (v. 42).

Apply the Word

As when Jesus sent out the Twelve, His sending out of the 72 in today's reading was a training exercise in leadership and ministry. But even more, it was an act of love for the people of Israel. The preaching and miracles done by this larger group of disciples gave many more people a chance to learn about Jesus than would otherwise have been possible. As He so often does, God was giving people maximum opportunity to turn to Him (see 1 Tim. 2:3–4).

Luke 10:2 Matthew 9:35-38

Ask the Lord of the harvest . . . to send out workers into his harvest field. - Luke 10:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

It's easy to feel discouraged when we hear about events in places like Iran, Iraq, and North Africa. That's why it's important to look behind the headlines. Missionaries in several Islamic countries have seen a growing interest in the gospel. In some places, entire villages have turned out to hear about Jesus. There are often more evangelistic opportunities than there are Christian workers.

This is very encouraging because sometimes we may feel like people in the United States aren't open to the gospel. But like recent missionary reports, today's passage challenges us to think differently. This passage briefly summarizes Jesus' ministry; the details are recorded in Matthew 9:18–34. Verse 36 brings us to the very heart of our Lord: when He saw the staggering physical, emotional, and spiritual needs around Him, He was filled with tender compassion. The Greek word for "compassion" indicates a response that's felt in the very depth of one's being. Like a good shepherd who cares for his vulnerable sheep, Jesus' heart went out to the helpless and hopeless.

This is indeed a wonderful insight into our Lord's heart, but there's another remarkable element in today's account. Upon seeing the needs around Him, notice that Jesus didn't pray that God would immediately meet all those needs, or even that He would enable Jesus to meet all of them. Instead, Jesus prayed that God would raise up more workers to join in the Lord's work! That's pretty amazing. Jesus deliberately chose to minister to the crowds by involving others to assist Him!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Have you ever looked at a world map and imagined people groups like fields waiting to be harvested? Many of us only have to look at our own neighborhoods to find ripe harvest fields. Like a farmer anxious to harvest precious crops, take some time to pray for more workers to labor in the Lord's fields. You can also inform your prayers by finding out about mission agencies your church supports or by visiting www.missionaries.org. Who knows . . . you may be the laborer whom the Lord is raising up!

Luke 10:17-24 Matthew 11:25-30;

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever. - Psalm 107:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

Professor Margaret Magdalen writes the following about the prayer life of Jesus: "His work was an offering of prayer. His healing ministry was a way of praying . . . He Himself was the way, the truth and the life, and every encounter, every relationship, became

prayer.” For the next week and a half, we’ll look at specific prayers uttered by Jesus, and as we do so, we’ll see that indeed Jesus’ very life was prayer. We begin today with Jesus’ prayer of praise for God’s perfect wisdom.

The prayer recorded in today’s passages comes after the early ministry of Jesus’ disciples. Luke 10 records Jesus sending out 72 disciples and their eager report back to Him about their “short-term mission.” Specifically, these disciples marveled that demons had submitted to them because of the name of Jesus (v. 17). Both Matthew’s and Luke’s account of this event record that Jesus rejoiced and thanked the Father for a much different reason.

Luke 10:18 tells us that because all authority had been given to Jesus, and He gave this authority to His disciples, Satan’s power had been broken. But it’s not the destruction of evil that brought Jesus joy as much as the fact that His followers would spend eternity in heaven! The disciples rejoiced that they had power over the enemy, but Jesus rejoiced because great spiritual truths had been revealed to those who were as powerless as babies (v. 24).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Author Brian J. Dodd writes, “Thanksgiving is essential to prayer, since all that we are, all that we have and all that we receive comes from our gracious God.”

Luke 10:25-37

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” - Luke 10:29

TODAY IN THE WORD

As Wesley Autrey waited for a New York subway train, he saw a man lapse into a seizure and fall onto the tracks. With a train fast approaching, the 50-year-old construction worker responded immediately, jumping off the platform and pulling the man into a foot-deep drainage trough between the rails. The train passed mere inches above the two men, who were unharmed. After the rescue Autrey commented, “I don’t feel like I did something spectacular; I just saw someone who needed help. I did what I thought was right.”

What seems like unusual heroism to most people is simply the right thing to do in God’s eyes. As we learn in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the command to love your neighbor as yourself demands something more than feelings of general goodwill and kindness.

The expert who tried to test Jesus had backed himself into a corner. He asked Jesus for the definition of a neighbor, hoping Jesus would bail him out with an answer that vindicated his limited view of compassion. Instead, Jesus turned the question around, defining the neighbor as the one who felt compassion and acted on it immediately and generously.

Jesus didn’t stop at answering the question, “Who is my neighbor?” He commanded the expert in the law to go and act as the Good Samaritan did. For a Jewish leader to be commanded to act like a Samaritan would have been particularly insulting, since the Jews despised the Samaritans culturally and religiously. Jesus also shattered the so-called expert’s ego by revealing his misunderstanding of one of the most fundamental commandments in the Mosaic law.

The parable illustrates the difference between knowing the law and having the law in your heart. This expert may have memorized every rule. The priest and Levite in the parable may have centered their daily lives on religious duties commanded by the law. But the Samaritan loved with compassion and behaved in a way that pleased God.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

As you study with us this month, this question might be in the back of your mind: “How do I know when I’ve done enough?” You’ll have your answer when you learn to stop asking that question. If you have your eyes directed on yourself, you’ll never be satisfied with what you see. But if you look outward at the needs of others, you’ll see opportunities to love with generous compassion. If you act on them, God will be glorified and you will know you’ve done the right thing.

Luke 10:25–37

Discovering an Unlikely Hero: A Religious Lawyer

Go and do likewise. Luke 10:37

The government of South Africa instituted apartheid in 1948, which legalized the separation of people of different races and restricted some privileges for whites only. A young lawyer named Nelson Mandela joined with others to actively resist his country’s unjust policies of segregation. Arrested for his activism, Mandela was imprisoned from 1962 until his release in 1990. Four years later, in the country’s first multiracial elections, Mandela was elected president of South Africa. Just a decade earlier, such an

outcome would be seemed not only unlikely but also impossible.

Centuries earlier, another lawyer had asked Jesus how to inherit eternal life. After establishing the importance of the two great commandments to love God and love neighbor, the lawyer asked Jesus just who his neighbor was. The story Jesus told in the presence of a curious crowd challenged every assumption the man held about “neighbor.” Jesus’ description of the kind of neighbor to emulate would have come as a huge surprise to this lawyer, most likely a specialist in religious law. After all, the hero in Jesus’ story was both the “wrong” race and the “wrong” religion! To the lawyer, and to all of the Jews who had gathered around to listen, the idea of a Samaritan hero was nothing less than preposterous.

It was a teaching that would have sounded shocking to religious insiders. It’s one of the reasons the first-century crowds who encountered Jesus didn’t describe Him the way some do today, as a “good teacher.” No, he was entirely unconventional! His convictions about who loved well, and who was worthy of love, were controversial. This particular exchange—surprising, offensive, risky—would have been remembered by the man, and by those who heard it, for years afterward.

Apply the Word - Jesus challenged the expert in religious law to imitate someone he would have considered to be an enemy. It is the same challenge extended to you today. Who is your unlikely neighbor? How are you being called to love others across boundaries of race and culture and religion by expressing genuine mercy and compassion in the name of Christ?

Luke 10:38–42

Science has shown that the spice turmeric has powerful healing properties. For example, because it contains the same anti-inflammatory ingredient as certain drugs, it can ease arthritis pain and swelling. Other studies suggest that it might also help prevent colon cancer and Alzheimer’s disease and improve liver functioning. Turmeric is found in much Indian food, including common dishes such as curry.

Turmeric can contribute to our physical health; listening contributes to our spiritual health. Listening perhaps poses a challenge for loquacious Americans. Our culture tends to teach us the value of expressing ourselves while neglecting the value of listening to others. By contrast, the book of Proverbs affirms the virtue of listening, including speaking less. “The prudent hold their tongues” (Prov. 10:19; cf. Prov. 17:27–28). “To answer before listening—that is folly and shame” (Prov. 18:13).

The familiar story of Mary sitting at Jesus’ feet reminds us that listening is valuable in and of itself. It was highly unusual for a Jewish rabbi to allow a woman to be present. Martha missed the point: she was annoyed that her sister wasn’t helping with hospitality-related tasks. Jesus explicitly sided with Mary, affirming that she had “chosen what is better” (v. 42). This was a contrast not only of actions but also of attitudes. Martha was complaining, worried, and upset, while Mary was humble, expectant, and teachable.

Listening can also be done badly, of course, as we’ve already seen this month. Samuel didn’t recognize God’s voice. Moses didn’t want to obey it. Balaam didn’t intend to heed it. The evil men in various psalms had no fear of it. Mary is a wonderful contrast and model to follow!

Apply the Word

An excellent book about listening is *The Lost Art of Listening* (2nd ed.) by Michael P. Nichols. It describes how most of us think we are better listeners than we actually are and explains practical steps to improving relational listening skills. The author asserts, “Listening to others is an ethical good . . . part of our moral commitment to each other.”

Luke 10:38–42

Stop Doing and Start Being: Martha

Few things are needed—or indeed only one. Luke 10:42

One day, two women in a church small group connected in an unusual way. One commented how much she admired all of the creations—paintings and sewing projects and beaded jewelry—that flowed out of the second woman’s home. The creative woman, though, had always admired the order and cleanliness of the first woman’s home. When she confessed that, the two laughed. They recognized that they each had discovered different strategies to “manage” their worlds: one produced messes; the other cleaned them up!

One of the ways we try to cope with the stresses of life is to stay busy. Jesus’ friend Martha—the Martha Stewart of her day—was a homemaker extraordinaire. Like many of us, she managed her life and anxiety by getting busy. When Martha welcomed Jesus and His disciples into her home, she went into overdrive to prepare for the meal. Frantic and exhausted, she envied and resented her sister, who sat quietly at Jesus’ feet listening to His teaching. Recognizing Martha’s tendency and her temptation to pin her worries on Mary, Jesus confirmed that Mary had chosen the better option.

Notice that part of Martha's problem was a failure to recognize context. Serving others through hospitality is important; in fact, it's commanded elsewhere in Scripture (Rom. 12:13; Heb. 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9). But Martha was more focused on managing than she was on worshiping. She wanted to prepare a lovely meal; Jesus wanted to feed her with spiritual food. This was an occasion where Martha didn't need to be in charge. She too could sit at the feet of Jesus and receive the blessing of His teaching.

Apply the Word - Discerning when to be busy and when to be still is part of wisdom, and it is desperately needed. We are tempted to extremes of being either spiritual workaholics, as if our efforts alone will bring in the kingdom, or spiritual couch potatoes, unable to be bothered to serve at all. Ask God for His wisdom, knowing He delights to grant this request (James 1:5).

LUKE 11

Luke 11

In his book, *Read, Think, Pray, Live*, youth pastor Tony Jones suggested that an old approach to prayer might be just the thing for modern young people. The approach is called *lectio divina*, and it involves four steps: reading a Scripture passage both aloud and silently, meditating on the passage, praying aloud about issues that God puts on one's heart during the previous step, and finally, contemplating God and resting in Him. The idea is that youth today are exceptionally busy and, thanks to technology, constantly multitasking. For this reason, they have a hard time "being still" before the Lord (Ps. 46:10). "*Lectio divina*" is one way for them to slow down and find silence in which they can hear God's voice.

Jesus taught His disciples another kind of model prayer in today's reading (vv. 1–4; cf. Matt. 6:5–13). It begins with "Father"—how gracious of Almighty God to encourage us to address Him with such an intimate term! This is not to take Him for granted, however—"hallowed be your name, your kingdom come" recognizes His holiness and sovereignty and prays for the whole world to do the same.

The first personal petition, "Give us each day our daily bread," is a request for basic physical needs to be met. The second, "Forgive us our sins," covers our most basic spiritual need and is followed by reminders that we, too, should forgive others and need God's help to resist sin's temptation. Jesus' expanded teaching on prayer emphasized persistence (vv. 5–8), boldness (vv. 9–10), and faith (vv. 11–13). We should pray tenaciously, believing that God can and will answer.

As seen in the rest of the chapter, prayer is important because it prepares the soul for spiritual experiences and conflicts beyond human strength. This included not only demonic opposition but also human opposition, as Jesus' enemies made the illogical argument that He was casting out evil spirits using Satan's power, demanded a sign in addition to all the miracles already performed, and focused on legalistic trivia like hand-washing and spice-tithing rather than justice and love (v. 42).

Apply the Word - Young people are not the only busy Americans who use technology to multitask. Who among us is beyond the reach of our cell phone? How often does the background noise of a car radio or MP3 player fill our ears while we're doing something else? Is "being still" before the Lord a lost art in our daily spiritual walk? Using the "*lectio divina*" approach, or simply using the model of the Lord's Prayer, might slow things down enough for us to be able to savor prayer and listen to God.

Luke 11:1 Matthew 6:5-15

Lord, teach us to pray. - Luke 11:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

"If we wish to pray with confidence and gladness, then the words of Holy Scripture will have to be the solid basis of our prayer. For here we know that Jesus Christ, the Word of God, teaches us to pray. The words which come from God become, then, the steps on which we find our way to God," wrote German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

It's our prayer that because of this month's study, the words of Holy Scripture have become the basis of your prayers. God's Word gives us both the content and the manner for prayer. As we close, it seems fitting to look at the prayer that Jesus gave to His disciples.

The intimacy with which Jesus addressed the Father was unprecedented. But John 1:12 tells us that we have become the children of God through faith in Christ, so we too may boldly call upon the Heavenly Father.

The prayer that God's name be kept holy, or hallowed, has been seen frequently in our study. You may recall Solomon's temple dedication prayer (see April 12) or Daniel's thanksgiving prayer (see April 18); both concerned about honoring God's name. We, too, must pray that the name of Christ be honored in all that we do.

We are also to pray for the advancement of the kingdom of God among His people (v. 10). Like Hannah (see April 10), we should submit our deepest longings to His perfect will and pray that His sovereign plan might be accomplished.

Praying for our daily bread means looking to the Lord for our every need, including things like food or shelter (as did Elijah; see April 14) or His sustaining presence (as did Moses; see April 4). As we saw with David (see April 10), forgiveness is one of our deepest human needs. Wholeness comes when we receive God's forgiveness and extend it to others.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

What a comprehensive prayer our Lord has given to us . . . six simple petitions that cover the whole of our spiritual and physical lives!

Luke 11:1-4 Matthew 6:9-13;

One of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray." - Luke 11:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

O thou by whom we come to God, The Life, the Truth, the Way! / The path of prayer thyself hast trod; Lord, teach us how to pray!

James Montgomery (1771–1854) penned these words expressing the simple truth that Jesus is the only way to the Father, and that the way is "the path of prayer." Centuries earlier, the disciples discovered this same truth.

Today's passage in Matthew and the parallel account in Luke record the prayer known either as the "Lord's Prayer" or the "Our Father." Most likely this is the most prayed and most translated prayer in the world!

Notice first how many times the word "us" appears, and also note the opening words "Our Father." This reminds us that, as believers, we're no longer isolated, but we're part of God's family. This prayer reminds us who God is—our Father in heaven. Even though we're part of His family, His ways aren't like our ways! It's His kingdom, and His will—not ours—that's to be carried out.

These points are important to keep in mind, because they remind us that when we pray, we aren't to begin with what we need, but with who God is. It's not that our needs are unimportant (as the rest of prayer makes clear), but our needs must be seen in light of the One to whom we're praying.

The second part of this prayer may be summarized in one word: provision. In that time, bread was an indispensable part of life—praying for daily bread meant praying for everything required for day-to-day living. The fact that forgiveness is listed next suggests that being forgiven and forgiving others is also essential for our daily well-being. Finally, we are urged to pray for spiritual protection from the temptation that surrounds us and from the Evil One who seeks to destroy us.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Because the Lord's prayer is so compact and comprehensive, many people have found it useful to pray one part of it each day of the week.

Luke 11:1-4; Matthew 6:9-133

Lord, teach us to pray. - Luke 11:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

In his classic work, *With Christ in the School of Prayer*, Andrew Murray writes: ""The place and power of prayer in the Christian life is too little understood. As long as we view prayer simply as the means of maintaining our own Christian lives, we will not fully understand what it is really supposed to be. But when we learn to regard it as the highest part of the work entrusted to us...we will see that there is nothing we need to study and practice more than the art of praying.""

Murray's century-old insights remain very timely for us. What a great introduction to our topic this month: the power of prayer! You would probably be hard-pressed to find a sincere Christian who doesn't want a powerful prayer life. We all do.

But Murray reminds us that a process precedes the power. There is nothing magical or mysterious about prayer. It is a spiritual discipline, a process of learning and growing.

Jesus' disciples wanted powerful prayer lives. And they went to the right source. Luke doesn't say Jesus was holding a teaching session on prayer, or even that the disciples were praying with Him. All we know is that as Jesus was praying one day, the disciples were watching and listening, and they wanted a prayer life like His.

Jesus' response to the request was a prayer that should really be called ""The Disciple's Prayer."" Matthew records that Jesus prefaced the prayer with instructions, and we'll consider these verses later on. For today, we'll consider Jesus' answer to the disciples'

request.

This prayer is a basic outline of the concerns that should be on our hearts as we approach God. The order of the concerns is all-important. Prayer that honors God and moves Him to action is prayer that focuses first on Him (Matt. 6:9-10). Our first task is to uphold and enhance His name and to desire His will and His kingdom.

Only then are we ready to bring our needs to God (v. 11). We don't have to do so reluctantly, since our Father urges us to make our needs known. The prayer for forgiveness and deliverance from temptation (vv. 12-13) reminds us to keep our relationships with others up to date and our eyes fixed on Jesus (Heb. 12:2).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Whether a believer is a veteran "prayer warrior" or a beginner, God always has something to teach him or her about prayer. Let's try an experiment today. Take a few minutes to think about and write out your greatest need when it comes to knowing how to pray--not the requests you may be praying for, but the one thing you feel you need to learn, or relearn, about prayer. Keep your card handy this month, and let's see what God does.

Luke 11:5-13

Your Father in heaven [will] give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him! - Luke 11:13

TODAY IN THE WORD

Emma Dryer was a brilliant woman. Orphaned at an early age and raised by her aunt, she received a good education and displayed unusual ability. She eventually became head of the women's faculty at Illinois State Normal University.

In 1870, she believed God was leading her into full-time Christian service, so she left her well-paid position and moved to Chicago, where she met Dwight and Emma Moody. Mr. Moody was moved by Miss Dryer's "contagious view of the Holy Spirit." As Moody biographer Lyle Dorsett says, Emma Dryer "taught about the Comforter--the Counselor--the One called alongside to assist the sincere disciple."

Emma Dryer had seen the Holy Spirit's power at work in her life, and she was never the same. As much as anyone else, it was her persistent urging that finally convinced D. L. Moody to move ahead with plans for a Bible school in Chicago.

Using a powerful story of a needy friend and neighbor, and the analogy of a father with his children, Jesus urged His followers to ask God for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Before Jesus' death and the birth of the church, the promise of the Holy Spirit's coming was still in the future (see John 14:16).

But on the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came to indwell believers permanently in fulfillment of Jesus' promise. So we have received the gift of the Spirit--but the question is how much of our lives the Holy Spirit has received from us.

Paul's command, "Be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18), suggests not only the priority of a Spirit-led life, but also the possibility that believers might settle for less than the Spirit's full control and direction.

One result of a Spirit-filled life is a passion for souls. The kind of commitment we have been studying about this month is not the result simply of human energy or enthusiasm. Only God, through His Spirit, can give us a burden for lost people that brings us to a place of commitment in the work of the gospel.

God's willingness to fill us with the Spirit is obvious. If we can give good gifts to one another, how much more is God eager to give us the fullness of His Spirit?

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Paul used a poignant analogy for the Spirit-filled life--that of a person under the influence of alcohol (Eph. 5:18).

The point the apostle was making is that a person "drunk on wine" is under the control of another master. The principle is the same with us and the Holy Spirit. If your desire is to submit yourself to the direction and influence of the Holy Spirit, and to experience the power that comes with Spirit-filled living, tell the Lord so today.

Luke 11:5-13

Petition: The Parable of the Midnight Visitor

Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Luke 11:11

Even the most nurturing parents would be excused for feeling exhausted by the seemingly constant needs of their children. Who hasn't wilted at the sound of another loud "Mom!" echoing through the house, signaling a youngster is in need of help. Again. The work of taking care of children can be overwhelming. And yet even harried parents meet the needs of their children, however imperfectly. How much more able and willing is God—a Father who is never tired and is perfectly good—to meet our needs?

Today's passage answers this question by telling the story of a midnight visitor who asked a neighbor for help in the middle of the night. Despite the inconvenience, the neighbor obliged. This story used to be described as the power of persistent petition, and persistence became the frame for understanding the following verses: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (v. 9). Some interpreters came close to asserting that repetition is required to get God's attention.

Greek scholars have revised their understanding of the word *anaideia* in verse 8: "yet because of your *anaideia* he will surely get up and give you as much as you need"—recasting it as shamelessness, not persistence. Indeed, the midnight visitor makes his request only once.

Jesus' parable is a powerful argument that God—even more than this neighbor—can be depended on to hear our prayers promptly and to respond freely. Unlike the midnight visitor who is considered shameless in the eyes of his neighbor, we need never feel bashful or embarrassed about bringing our cares and concerns to the Lord in prayer. We are His children, and His capacity for compassion and attention are boundless.

Apply the Word

Despite the fact that God assures us He is listening and cares about our needs, we don't always see the response we think we need. Thank the Lord today for His desire to give good gifts and pray for discernment, that your own desires would continue to grow in alignment with His mysterious yet perfect will.

Luke 11:14–28

The Surprisingly Blessed Body

Professor Jeffery Sobal studies culturally determined ideas about body size and shape. In one article he described the reaction of South Pacific islanders to *Blue Hawaii*, a movie starring Elvis Presley. While North Americans tend to value thin, firm bodies, the islanders prefer stocky, curvy women. Sobal explains, "They couldn't understand why he spent all his time chasing the skinny blonde in the bikini." They thought her friend was a better catch.

Not only do different society's values conflict with each other, they can also conflict with kingdom values. In Jesus' culture, women were valued for what their bodies could do. Fertile women who were able to produce many offspring were esteemed. Infertile women who were unable to bear children experienced the weight of cultural shame. As an example of this value system, one woman in the crowd shouted out a common blessing to Jesus, "Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you!" (v. 27). It was intended as a high compliment.

Jesus' response inverts this compliment to change values and priorities. Throughout the Gospels, we witness a culture's discrimination against those whose bodies are disabled, and we also see Jesus moving toward those who are blind and deaf, toward those who are bent and paralyzed. He brings the values of a new kingdom.

Notice that this woman's compliment wasn't bad—the ability to bear and nurture children is a marvelous gift. But it is not the greatest gift. Kingdom values— hearing and obeying God's Word— trumps even the most wonderful thing human bodies can do. Jesus affirms that true blessedness is accessible to all who turn toward God's truth.

Apply the Word

Are you aware of what your society values about bodies? Who are the ones featured in magazines and plastered on billboards? Kingdom values proclaim that the person who is truly blessed is the one who hears God's Word and obeys. No matter what kind of body you have, you can listen and obey today!

Luke 11:34 Matthew 5:27-30

Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eyes are good, your whole body also is full of light. - Luke 11:34

TODAY IN THE WORD

Moshe Dayan, the former Israeli minister of defense and foreign minister, was blind in one eye and wore an eye patch. An officer once stopped him for speeding. "I have only one eye," Dayan complained to the officer. "What do you want me to watch—the

speedometer or the road?"

What we choose to look at matters. Jesus' warning in today's passage provides a sobering reminder that how we choose to look is equally important. Although sin is often expressed through our actions, it is rooted in attitude of the heart. Once our definition of sin is expanded to include motives as well as actions, we realize that we can commit sin even before we take any action. People who commit adultery merely ratify by their deeds the sin they've already committed in their hearts.

Jesus' expansive definition in this passage does more than expose new categories of sin. Ultimately it reveals both our vulnerability and our responsibility. If sin begins in the heart, so that the lustful look offends God as much as the act of adultery, both our danger and our guilt are far greater than most of us imagine. If we apply Jesus' standard to our thoughts and motives, it will not be very long before we cry out along with the prophet Jeremiah, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9). We will soon discover that our only hope lies in God's forgiveness through Christ.

Jesus' warning implies that, while there is a remedy, it is not an "easy" one. The disturbing language of self-mutilation in this passage is not meant to be taken literally. It is hyperbolic language, intended to emphasize the urgency of avoiding sin. Those who truly understand sin's seriousness will do "whatever it takes" to deal with it. But what does it take?

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus mentions the potential that we have to sin with certain members of our bodies. Think of ways that you can use parts of your body either for sin or for righteousness. For example, the same tongue that can be used in a sinful way to slander someone can also be used to share the gospel with them or to praise God (cf. James 3:Cool. Think of other members of your body and identify one way that they can be used to sin and at least one alternative way

Luke 11:37–41

Called to Be Made Clean: A Pharisee

But now as for what is inside you—be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you. Luke 11:41

A man in a rush to get to work quickly scanned the family kitchen for breakfast food. Spotting a few boxes of cereal, he grabbed the closest one and poured out a handful to eat as he dashed to his car. Rather than feeling the tumble of light, fluffy cocoa cereal balls, though, the man felt a small thud. When he looked closer at his hand, he realized that a small grey mouse had dropped in for a bite of cereal, but it was unable to climb back up the slippery box liner and had died in the cereal box. Although the outside of the box promised tasty breakfast food, the inside had been full of death.

This is similar to the condition of the Pharisees' hearts. One of them expressed disapproval when Jesus did not perform the ritual washing that was expected before a meal. Jesus replied, "You Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness" (v. 39). He knew that people who turned to the Pharisees for spiritual nourishment received little more than a dead mouse.

Jesus identified that a shiny façade of goodness covered rotten insides. Jesus did not, however, stop at condemnation of their sin. Rather, He offered a cure for the spiritual sickness moldering in their souls: "Be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you" (v. 41). This prescription confirms that while maintaining the appearance of religious rightness, they had failed to execute God's justice and mercy. Jesus' will for them was that by repentance—turning from greed and turning toward ministry to the poor—new life would spring up inside them from the decaying compost of the old.

Apply the Word - For Christians who follow Jesus, ministry to the poor is a spiritual issue. Jesus confronted the religious leaders about their pride, greed, and legalistic rules that kept the poor away. Does your church minister to physical, spiritual, and relational needs of those at the margins of society? May we not be like the Pharisees, full of smug complacency that stinks like death.

LUKE 12

Luke 12

Junior high school science teacher Doug Edmonds makes science "cool." Using music, Edmonds takes popular songs and rewrites the lyrics in order to explain scientific ideas such as density and chemical bonds. Then he creates videos of himself singing the new song, complete with visual aids such as flash cards and diagrams. These music videos are posted on the Internet, where his students (and anyone else) can learn from them. The songs help his students to remember and understand complex concepts. One said, "If I'm ever struggling on a quiz, I'll just sort of sing them to my—self."

As seen in His parables and elsewhere, Jesus was also a creative master teacher. Even when delivering spiritual warnings, He did so in powerful language and memorable images. There are seven things in today's reading that He warned us to be on guard

against.

(1) Hypocrisy (vv. 1–3). He called this “the yeast of the Pharisees” and warned that one day their true character would be known. (2) Disrespecting God (vv. 4–12). He cares for us, but those who reject Him will themselves be rejected on judgment day. When we stand firm, by contrast, He helps us. (3) Greed (vv. 13–21). The rich fool in the parable disrespected God and put his trust in the wrong object. In the end, his material possessions couldn’t save him. By comparison, we should seek God’s kingdom as genuine treasure.

(4) Worry (vv. 22–34). Greed might in part be fueled by worry or anxiety, which shows a lack of faith in God to care and provide. A lack of generosity might also show that we’re anxiously attached to our material resources. (5) Spiritual unreadiness (vv. 35–48). The servants in the parable weren’t ready for their master’s return. Committed servants of God need to be faithful and vigilant. (6) Spiritual unfaithfulness (vv. 49–53). Faith in Christ creates difficult social and personal choices, but proper priorities mean God must always come first. (7) Spiritual blindness (vv. 54–59). We need to be sensitive to the “signs of the times” and on the lookout for what God is doing.

Apply the Word

Financial worry might be high—after all, today is when personal income tax returns must be filed in the United States, though this year we actually have until Monday, April 18. Tax season is an excellent time to take to heart Jesus’ warnings concerning greed and worry. Those with more should remember that “life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (v. 15)—those with less, that we should “seek his kingdom, and [food and clothing] will be given to you as well” (v. 31).

Luke 12:15 Ephesians 5:3-10; Colossians 3:5-10

Be on your guard against all kinds of greed. - Luke 12:15

TODAY IN THE WORD

There once was a very wealthy man. His farmland was very productive. In fact, his crops were so abundant that his barn couldn’t hold the harvest. He wasn’t quite sure what to do. Finally, he decided to build a bigger barn for the extra grain. Then he could just sit back and relax, knowing that he didn’t have to worry about a thing—he had more than enough. But God was displeased with this plan, and said to the greedy man, “You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?” (Luke 12:20).

You may be wondering what the Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21) has to do with today’s readings. At first glance, it seems as if these two passages primarily concern sexual immorality. But a closer reading shows that greed is an important part of each passage as well. What Luke 12, Ephesians 5, and Colossians 3 all have in common is that they show that greed is a failure to recognize that every good gift comes from God and to be thankful for what God had provided. In the parable, the rich fool fails to see that his harvest is a gift from God. In Paul’s exhortations to the Ephesians and Colossians, problems with sexual immorality are linked with a failure to be thankful for what God has given.

The connection between sexual sin and greed goes back to the tenth commandment, which forbids coveting the wife of one’s neighbor. As our previous study showed, covetousness is a failure to be thankful for what God has provided, which leads to looking elsewhere (see November 9). We also noted that thanksgiving was part of God’s calling for His people. Paul may have had these covenant commandments in mind when he wrote Ephesians. Notice also the clear connection that Paul draws between “God’s holy people” (v. 3) and thanksgiving.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It may be surprising that Paul links greed with idolatry in Colossians 3:5. But recall that the first commandment forbids having any other god apart from the Lord God. Greed can easily lead to idolatry because we’re focused on the gift, such as sexual intimacy, rather than the Giver of the gift and His purposes for the gift. Once again, thanksgiving is the key. As Bible scholar Walter Liefeld writes, “Thanksgiving . . . not only expresses satisfaction but, in a sense, can even create satisfaction within us.”

Luke 12:22-34

Teddy Roosevelt, an avid outdoorsman, believed strongly in the protection of the nation’s natural resources. Under his presidency, 230 million acres of land were protected as national parks and nature preserves. A century later, millions of people still flock to U.S. national parks like Yellowstone and Yosemite and marvel at the beautiful vistas and majestic landscapes.

As Christians, we understand that it is God, not creation, whom we’re called to worship. At the same time, the natural world is spiritual in one sense, revealing God’s attributes, and (as Jesus taught here in the Gospel of Luke) offering object lessons about trusting God. In challenging His disciples to abandon worry and fear, He calls their attention to the birds of the air and the flowers of

the field. The birds have no impulse to build barns where they might store their grain. The flowers do not work to dress themselves each day. It's their Creator who cares for them.

By contrast, we as humans have superior faculties to the animals and the plants. We are created in the image of God, endowed with the capacity to work and plan. It's by our work that we provide for ourselves food and clothes and shelter. And while the capacity for work reflects the divine image (for God Himself works), that image has been disfigured. Now worry and fear is embedded even in our work. Jesus calls us back to faith, reminding us that ultimately it's still the Creator's job to care for us. Only He guarantees life, breath, and health, all of which make our work possible.

It's another lesson in smallness, similar to the themes we found in the concluding chapter of Ecclesiastes and Psalm 90. Worry and fear have as their root a kind of misunderstanding about who's in charge. If we're ultimately in charge, there is great cause for fear! But if God is the Creator who still watches over His creation, we can find peace.

Apply the Word

In this sermon Jesus contrasts the perspective of the pagan and believer. To be in ultimate control (as a pagan believes himself to be), is to lead a life riddled with worry. The pagan assumes the job title of Creator, but lives with the knowledge of his inadequacy. Believers, on the other hand, rest in their smallness. It's good to be a creature, trusting the Creator for His protection and His provision. When fear rises in your throat, prayerfully celebrate, "I am a creature. He is the Creator."

Luke 12:22-34

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. - Luke 12:22

TODAY IN THE WORD

Bob Russell, a pastor in Kentucky, points out that Jesus' teaching in Luke 12 means 'worry is a choice. To say, 'I just can't help worrying about this' is a cop-out. We don't like giving up control. We think if we worry enough we'll be prepared, [and] might even change the outcome.'

Here's another good reminder for us on the edge of a new millennium and the uncertainty it brings. If worry could prepare us to face a problem, or even change the outcome, the 'millennium bug' would be a distant memory for many people.

You could make a case that more worry has been spent on Y2K and related issues than on any problem in recent memory. Jesus anticipated our human tendency to lie awake at night wondering how we're going to make ends meet, what will happen tomorrow, or what the world is coming to. He had the right cure for the wrong-headed approach of worry.

Luke places this teaching of Jesus after an incident in which a man tried to get Jesus' help to get his share of the family inheritance. Jesus refused to get entangled in the dispute, instead issuing a strong warning against greed by telling about a greedy farmer (vv. 13-21).

Then Jesus turned to His disciples for a follow-up lesson. This is 'family business' of a different kind. Only a follower of Jesus can really understand and apply what He says about living a life that pleases God.

These are well-known verses, but they take on even more meaning when we read them in the context of an uncertain future. God's promise to meet our daily needs is not just an insurance policy against hunger or a lack of adequate clothing. God wants to free us from allowing these things to fill up our time and attention and ultimately to replace the priority of His kingdom.

Should it surprise us that the world is talking about stockpiling essentials, or that some people have taken advantage of the Y2K scare to turn a quick profit? Not according to Jesus. That's the kind of thing 'the pagan world runs after' (v. 30).

But when our consuming commitment is to seek God

and His righteousness, we are so secure that we can give everything away and still own the kingdom!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Why not give yourself a few minutes to worry about your biggest concern?

We're serious. Think through what might happen if your worry came true. Imagine how it might affect your income, health, or family. And fret for a minute over what you can do about it. When you're finished, turn your biggest worry into the first item on your prayer list today. But before you get to that, spend time praising God for His daily goodness to you.

LUKE 13

Luke 13

Author and pastor John Piper wrote: “We were made to know and treasure the glory of God above all things. . . . The sun of God’s glory was made to shine at the center of the solar system of our soul. And when it does, all the planets of our life are held in their proper orbit. But when the sun is displaced, everything flies apart. The healing of the soul begins by restoring the glory of God to its flaming, all-attracting place at the center. We are all starved for the glory of God, not self. . . . Into the darkness of petty self-preoccupation has shone ‘the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God’ (2 Corinthians 4:4).”

Genuine faith keeps God at the center. When we sin, genuine repentance restores the relationship (vv. 1–9). In the thinking of Jesus’ day (and perhaps in the thinking of some in our own day), people who suffer tragedies must have done something wicked to deserve it. Presented with an example, however, Jesus essentially said that all people are sinners and equally deserving of divine punishment unless they repent. We cannot say that bad things happening show that a person must be especially bad. We are all sinful (Rom. 3:22–24). Like the fig tree in the parable, we all will be held accountable for our actions.

At present, the kingdom of God (vv. 18–30) is about people’s inner faith. The Lord can take faith as small as a mustard seed and turn it into a huge tree, or faith as small as a bit of yeast and mix it throughout a large batch of dough. Initially small and unimpressive, the mustard seed and bit of yeast will be victorious in the end, just as faith will be. In the future, the kingdom of God will be like a celebratory banquet of the faithful, global in scope but also full of overturned expectations. People who think they should be “in” will turn out to be “out” because they neglected the only banquet invitation that mattered—the “narrow door” of faith in Jesus Christ.

Apply the Word

If “God so loved the world” and the kingdom banquet will welcome guests from all over the world, why did Jesus speak of faith as a “narrow door” (v. 24)? Because there is one and only one way to God—belief in His Son, Jesus Christ (John 14:6). No other way will do, no matter how “spiritual” or well intentioned. This truth offends many in our pluralistic age, but it reminds us of the rich necessity of “seeing and savoring Jesus Christ” (the title of a book by John Piper).

Luke 13:10–17

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus can be found in the places to worship God, whether temple or synagogue. In today’s passage, we see Him again teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath (v. 10). As we’ve seen the past few days, Jesus carried out His promise to release the oppressed and once more faced opposition.

The first person introduced in the congregation was likely the most marginalized: a disabled woman (v. 11). Her physical condition, “crippled,” also describes her social and spiritual position. Jesus saw this woman who was usually invisible to others; He invited her to Himself. As with the leprous man and the bleeding woman, Jesus’ touch brought healing.

Notice that Jesus said, “You are set free from your infirmity” (v. 12). Liberation is not the typical way to express physical healing. Yet Luke has already told us that the woman was “crippled by a spirit,” and Jesus confirmed that she was under satanic bondage (v. 16). Luke makes a connection between this instance of physical infirmity and the influence of Satan. For this woman, physical healing could not be separated from her spiritual freedom. When she was healed and set free, her physical and spiritual postures transformed instantly (v. 13).

One job of the synagogue ruler was to maintain faithfulness to the Mosaic Law in the teaching and actions in the synagogue. According to this person, Jesus violated Deuteronomy 5:13. In front of the assembly, he challenged Jesus’ authority to heal. But Jesus is Lord, full of all power and authority in heaven and on earth (v. 15). In response to this charge, Jesus shamed His opponents and confirmed His authority to interpret the Law and fulfill God’s redemptive purposes (vv. 15–17). As He argued: If you can free an animal on the Sabbath, how much more a “daughter of Abraham”? Jesus emphasized her inclusion in the community of God. If you can liberate an animal bound for a few hours, how much more this woman bound by Satan for 18 years! Jesus made clear that God’s purposes are to release the oppressed, and it is a misinterpretation of the Law to deny salvation on the Sabbath.

Apply the Word

Jesus challenged the practices and power structures of His day. Like Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace; like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Corrie ten Boom who resisted Nazi decrees; like John Perkins who withstood segregation, throughout history God’s people have been known for courageously opposing laws, systems, and power brokers that did not comport with God’s purposes in the world. If you need encouragement to stand for the Lord in the face of injustice, read a biography of one of these brave Christians.

LUKE 14

Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple. - Luke 14:33

TODAY IN THE WORD

Following a journey of more than nine months, NASA's Climate Orbiter was set to enter orbit around Mars on September 23, 1999. Its mission was to gather information on Mars' water history.

The craft fired its engine, but something went wrong. It plunged too far into the atmosphere, becoming uncontrollable. Its engine overheated and shut down, which may have allowed the craft to emerge on the other side of the Martian atmosphere.

What happened? For a certain key function, one group of engineers used English units of measurement, while another group used the metric system. In short, they miscounted! If it survived, the \$125 million device may now be orbiting the sun.

Counting (or miscounting, as the case may be) has consequences. That's why in today's reading Jesus urged His audience to count the cost of following Him. By way of introduction, He spoke of priorities we have already heard about. Believers must "hate" their families, a hyperbole trumpeting the supreme importance and intensity of discipleship (v. 26). We must also take up our crosses, traveling Christ's road of suffering and self-denial (v. 27).

Jesus used two illustrations to explain the difficulties: a building project and a potential battle. In both cases, someone needed to compare costs to resources and then estimate what could be accomplished with the available resources. What's the lesson? "In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple" (v. 33). To "give up" doesn't mean to sell—literally, it means to "say goodbye." That is, we give up our "rights" to other things, surrendering them for the sake of Christ, the pearl of great price.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus emphasized the cost of discipleship. Dallas Willard (Nov. 13) wrote of the "cost of nondiscipleship."

Luke 14

In one of the persecutions of Christians in the days of the Roman empire, a young believer named Procopius of Palestine gave his life for the sake of the gospel. He was brought before a magistrate in Caesarea and ordered to sacrifice to the gods, but he refused, saying, "There is no God but one only, the Maker and Creator of all things." Then they told him to sacrifice to four Roman emperors, but again he stood firm and refused. For his faithfulness, he was beheaded on July 7, A.D. 303.

As Jesus said, true disciples must give up everything to follow Him (v. 33). In essence, discipleship is what needs to happen after we walk through the "narrow door" of faith in Christ (vv. 25–35).

This commitment is so extreme that Jesus explained it by using two rather shocking figures of speech: First, following Him requires such dedication that hyperbolically it's like hating your family and even your own life. Second, following Him requires such dedication that metaphorically it's like carrying a cross. As a means of executing criminals, a cross suggested shame, suffering, and death. In modern terms, it's as though Jesus had said, "Want to follow me? You'll need to have a seat in the electric chair." To be His disciple we need to "count the cost" or understand the all-out, holding-nothing-back nature of the relationship.

One significant dimension of discipleship is hospitality. In today's reading, Jesus drew an analogy between earthly and divine hospitality (vv. 12–24). At the time, he was receiving hospitality from a Pharisee, evidence that He continued to reach out to the religious leaders and give them further opportunities to believe in Him. After exhorting His listeners to good deeds (instead of hypocrisy) and humility (instead of pride), Jesus addressed the topic of hospitality and generosity. These should be offered freely, without expectation of repayment. God Himself has invited us to a heavenly banquet, even though He knows few will accept and none can repay Him. Refusing His hospitality is a bad idea, for accepting it is the only way to life and the most important decision we'll ever make.

Apply the Word

Many American Christians rarely link discipleship with hospitality. We like our individual space, and besides, we're always busy! Hospitality can be viewed as an imposition or a Better Homes and Gardens-style performance. When we realize, however, that the people we are to invite into our homes are the same ones God has invited to His kingdom banquet, we realize how important it can be. Done as an act of discipleship, hospitality can be an expression of God's love to others.

LUKE 15

Luke 15

Preoccupied with plans for upcoming concerts and tours, classical violinist Gidon Kremer accidentally left his \$3 million violin behind on a train. Once he realized the situation, he urgently called Amtrak officials to see what could be done. A baggage handler found the violin, undisturbed in its blue cloth case, and the valuable instrument was quickly returned to its owner. As a thank-you, Kremer invited the Amtrak employee who had located the violin to one of his concerts.

As eagerly as Kremer searched for his lost violin, God is even more passionate in searching for spiritually lost individuals. Up to this point in our month's study, we have divided Luke's Gospel into three main parts: Jesus' birth (Luke 1–2), the start of His public ministry (chap. 3–7), and His main teachings (chap. 8–14). Today we begin a fourth section on the theme of God's kingdom in Jesus' teaching (chap. 15–19:27), to be followed by a final section on Passion Week, that is, Jesus' death and resurrection (19:28–24:53).

The three parables in today's reading reveal the joy God takes in saving the lost. The Pharisees thought it was improper for a rabbi to fraternize with "tax collectors and sinners," but Jesus wanted everyone to know that this is what the kingdom of God is all about! His first story involved a lost sheep (vv. 3–7), the second a lost coin (vv. 8–10), and the third a lost son (vv. 11–32). The first two begin with an item that gets lost, and then a careful effort is made to find it, upon which great rejoicing follows. From a spiritual perspective, sin is lostness and redemption is "foundness," so finding the lost item represents a sinner who by the grace of God repents.

The third parable is similar but more complex. The lost item in this story is a person who makes a series of choices. These choices include extreme disrespect to his father, selfishness, pleasure-seeking, wastefulness, and pride. By contrast, the father's choices include grace, mercy, compassion, unconditional love, and finally a celebration of "life out of death" when his son returned.

Apply the Word

While the shepherd and the housewife in the parables searched diligently for their lost items, the third story doesn't mention the father searching at all. He let the son make his choices and walk his wayward road—what he did do was watch and pray. When the prodigal returned, he ran to meet him and threw a celebratory banquet. Sometimes our vigilant concern for the salvation of those we love means we must watch and pray, trusting that God is working in their hearts.

Luke 15:1-10

There is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. - Luke 15:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

Once again, the life of Dwight L. Moody gives us a powerful illustration of what it means to have a passion for souls. As Moody's ministry grew, he struggled mightily over the question of whether he should leave the business world and enter the work of Christ full-time. Once Moody made the decision and informed his employers of his intention to resign, most of his friends counseled Moody against this "wild undertaking" of going into full-time ministry. But his future wife, seventeen-year-old Emma Revell, promised to stand by him in his decision.

It's easy for well-meaning people to misunderstand a passion such as this. Most of Moody's friends probably weren't motivated by opposition to the gospel. They just didn't think it made sense for someone so successful and gifted in business to throw it all away. But Moody had made seeking souls his ultimate priority.

In doing this, Dwight Moody was like his Lord. Through the parables of Luke 15, Jesus was teaching the Pharisees that it was not only right for Him to seek the lost, it pleased God. The Pharisees considered tax collectors and "sinners" beneath them, but these were the kind of people Jesus came to seek.

We're dealing today with the first two parables of this famous chapter, which are less familiar than the story of the prodigal son but teach the same basic principle. When a person comes to know Christ, heaven is filled with rejoicing.

The stories of the shepherd and of the woman also emphasize God's initiative in seeking the lost, which is a major theme throughout Luke. What a contrast to the Pharisees' attitude of completely avoiding sinners!

The value of each person is also obvious from these stories. The shepherd was not content with his 99 sheep, because one was missing and in danger. The woman would not rest until she had found the lost coin, which may have been part of her dowry.

Jesus mentioned the angels as part of the heavenly rejoicing over the salvation of even one sinner. But the greatest joy belongs to God the Father, just as the father was the happiest of all when his son returned.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We can't help but be challenged by the example of people who are willing to forego wealth on earth for the true riches of heaven.

That leads to a question worth considering today. Would you be willing to give up something this week to spend extra time praying for lost people you know? Maybe you could dedicate a lunch hour to prayer and fasting for unsaved friends or family. Or leave off favorite TV programs for a few days and spend that time with the Lord. We urge you to consider a sacrifice for souls this week.

Luke 15:1-32

There is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. - Luke 15:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is one of the Bible's most well-known stories—familiar even to those outside the church—and it's found only in Luke. Along with the Parables of the Lost Coin and the Lost Sheep, the Prodigal Son is known primarily for the individual who is lost, but the driving force of the story is the compassionate love of the father.

Compassion was sorely lacking in the hearts of the Pharisees. A true man of God would have been thrilled that the so-called sinners welcomed by Christ were seeking to repent, and Jesus revealed a secret about how the heavenly realms looked upon the situation. Even angels, who like the oldest son in the parable had never left their master, were able to celebrate and welcome a lost sinner home.

This is a critical part of Jesus' teaching. Up to this point in Luke, some may have assumed that Jesus was pronouncing an inflexible final judgment against Jews who rejected Him. But this set of parables illustrates God's abiding love for His children who have rebelled and drifted away.

The eldest son of the parable may have been symbolic of Pharisees or other devout men and women who welcomed Jesus but cringed at the company He kept. The thrust of the passage is directed at those who consider themselves part of God's house but have improper attitudes toward the lost. Jesus was concerned not only for the salvation of His children but also for their maturation in His love and acceptance of all people.

The parable ends on a high note, with the father extending assurance and compassion to his pouting eldest son. Instead of rebuking him for his jealousy and stony spirit, the father reaffirmed the son's place in the family and invited him to experience the joy of the celebration.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Are there any people for whom you have trouble praying? Be honest with yourself and ask the Holy Spirit to search out your heart and reveal any unfair attitudes toward others. We should not rejoice in the judgment of "sinners," but instead we should earnestly pray for their repentance and salvation and hope for the day when we can rejoice with all of heaven when that prayer is answered.

Luke 15:11-32

Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. - Matthew 7:6

TODAY IN THE WORD

Pigs have developed a reputation as a synonym for filth and laziness. Several expressions about sloppiness and disregard for appearance use the word pig to convey contempt or disgust. They roll in mud to cool themselves. They will eat almost anything. They're known to carry a host of diseases and parasites. And anyone who has ever lived within a mile of a pig farm can attest to pigs' unpleasant odor. In some cultures, to be compared to a pig is the greatest insult.

The prodigal son of today's reading had immersed himself in the life of pigs. He was attending to pigs that, while unclean, had something to eat, which was more than he could say for himself (v. 16). What a stark contrast with the life he had just recently abandoned with a wealthy father who loved him.

The insult of being less fortunate than swine was actually minor compared to what the son had inflicted on his father. By asking for his inheritance from a parent who was still living, the son essentially said he wanted to live his life as though his father were dead. He compounded the insult by rejecting not only his family, but also his family's way of life (v. 13). What his father intended to bestow on him as a gift, he wasted in an instant.

The pigs, ironically, brought the young man to his senses. He was lower than the worst animals on his own, but if he returned to his father's house as a servant, he could eat with food to spare (v. 17). It's an interesting picture of the change in perspective undergone

by anyone who rejects God and then recognizes the foolishness of doing so. Once so proud as to deny His existence, the sinner's heart can be turned to desire to serve Him.

But the father, as a portrait of our heavenly Father, had not lost the slightest bit of love for his son. The moment he saw that his son had turned toward him, the sins and indignity the son had committed against him were of no consideration—all the father desired was to celebrate the return of his lost child (vv. 20, 32).

APPLY THE WORD

The final statement of the loving father speaks powerfully to the true nature of rebellion against God. Those who reject His love may believe that they are putting the thought of God to death—but being without Him is truly a death in itself. If you have been ignoring your Father's love, embrace the life He has waiting for you. And if you know someone who has left God behind, await their return with a heart of compassion.

Luke 15:11–32

Today's passage is the third parable Jesus told to His audience in response to the disapproving mutterings of the religious leaders, another story illustrating God's tenacious regard for the lost (see Luke 15:1–2). We'll focus on the way that the parable of the lost son draws our attention to family relationships and the characteristics of the father.

The man of the parable is referred to as "father" twelve times. His younger son displayed audacity and impudence. He acted outside the cultural bounds of his identity as a son and a Jew. He demanded his inheritance, which was to be given upon death of the benefactor. Then he recklessly spent everything and began living like a Gentile. Disillusioned, he offered to redefine his relationship with his father in terms of master and slave (vv. 17–19).

The older son appeared to be dutiful and mature, but a second glance reveals alienation from his father and jealousy in his heart. The celebration of his brother's return angered him and highlighted his distorted view of his relationship with his father. Like his brother, he framed this relationship in terms of master and slave. Thus, he "worked" for his dad and followed rules with military precision. It also warped his relationship with his brother, who became competition and a threat to his perception of justice in the workplace.

The father illustrates God's love. Compassion and tenderness define the father's love toward his two sons. He ran to meet his younger son, and he left the party—of which he was the host—in order to reconcile with his older son (v. 28). His love was not bound by cultural expectations of a stately Jewish man in the ancient world. He restored both sons to proper relation with himself. He welcomed his younger son with celebration rather than punishment, and he reminded his older son that he was not a slave, but his son and heir who had access to his abundant resources (v. 31). He also reconciled his eldest son to his brother, inviting him to join the celebration of his homecoming (v. 32).

Apply the Word

How do you relate with God your Father? Do you identify with the sons who distorted their relationship with their father, considering themselves his slaves and him their master? Do you more resemble the younger son or the older son? Reflect on your relationship with the Father. Ask the Holy Spirit to clear your heart and mind of misconceptions and allow you to know God's love as it actually is: compassionate, hospitable, bountiful, and merciful. Pray to be free from relating to God as a slave does to a master.

LUKE 16

Luke 16

Recent studies suggest that Americans' religious walk doesn't match their religious talk. Seventy percent say they have no doubt God exists, and 40 percent claim to attend religious services regularly. Empirical evidence contradicts the latter claim, however. One study asked people to narrate their Sunday schedules, another estimated religious service attendance nationwide and compared that to poll responses, and another examined nearly 500 different time-use studies. All concluded that actual church attendance is only about half of what people say. Although most Americans don't go to religious services, they apparently want others to believe they do.

God is not fooled by such posturing. He knows our hearts (v. 15)—in time our actions will prove what our hearts truly value. That's why the good news of the coming of the kingdom of God in today's reading (v. 16) is accompanied by so many practical, moral commands. Jesus taught things that weren't popular then and aren't popular now, but they're true nonetheless. One cannot serve both God and money (v. 13). Divorce is related to adultery (v. 18). Riches can be a barrier to faith. Submission and stewardship are important spiritual disciplines. God is no respecter of persons.

The two main parables in this chapter deal with money. The parable of the shrewd manager teaches that money is a means, not an end. To give up money—not his money, but money nonetheless—to get friends showed a kind of cleverness that treated money as a means to a better end. If an unethical person can show the way in this area, how much more will spiritual wisdom lead us to treat money as a means to eternal ends. Earthly stewardship is a warm-up for heaven.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus teaches us, among other things, that riches can be a barrier to faith when they compete for loyalty and priority in our lives. The rich man's comfortable state on earth had led him to neglect faith and godliness, and as a result he ended up in hell. Too late he realized that he had lived for the wrong things!

Apply the Word

The phrase "everyone is forcing his way into it" (v. 16) is a difficult phrase to translate. The idea of "force" can have positive or negative connotations. It seems to point toward the passion, positive or negative, of people's responses to the ministry of Jesus. To paraphrase this verse, "God's Word promised the kingdom all along. Since John the Baptist its arrival has been proclaimed and people have been violently embracing or rejecting it." Which one describes you?

Luke 16:1-17:37

But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. - Joshua 24:15

TODAY IN THE WORD

Chapters 16 and 17 in Luke are loaded with difficult and sometimes controversial passages. The commendation of a dishonest manager, the coming of the kingdom of God, the issue of remarriage after divorce, and the description of heaven and hell are potentially confusing or sensitive topics, but a very simple ideal runs through each one.

Selfishness or servitude? That question rests at the heart of these two chapters. The dishonest manager redeemed himself not by trickery but by generosity (16:9-13). Men and women were forsaking their vows to God to pursue their own lustful urges (16:18). The Twelve wanted greater faith when they should have gratefully recognized what they had (17:6, 10). The thankless lepers and the fools who ignored the coming judgment all served their own desires. But the most shocking selfishness comes in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man.

When the rich man glimpsed Abraham in paradise, he didn't ask to be let out or to be carried to Abraham's side. He only asked that Lazarus would come to him or that he would go to the man's family. The rich man didn't consider repenting himself, not that it would have mattered after he died.

As for his family, Abraham predicted judgment against them as well because they had already rejected the word of Moses and the Prophets. God had already spoken to them, and no miracle would have been enough to redirect their hearts.

The parable also confirms the concept of eternal judgment. The contrast in the descriptions of the deaths of Lazarus (who was carried away by angels) and the rich man (who was simply buried) effectively illustrates the chasm between eternal life and damnation.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Do we, like the Pharisees, ever fall into the trap of loving money? We can attempt to justify our spending habits, and slick explanations can fool our friends or even ourselves. But God knows our hearts. If you are clinging to material possessions and tempering your generosity, it will prevent you from serving in God's kingdom—we can't have it both ways. Choose today to serve God and be willing to surrender all that He desires of you.

Luke 16:10-12.

TODAY IN THE WORD

You can tell a lot about a person by his...hair? Scientists at a laboratory in Tucson, Arizona, are analyzing a six-inch lock of hair belonging to the great composer, Ludwig van Beethoven. The hair, clipped by an admirer after Beethoven's death, was purchased for \$7■ at a Sotheby's auction. The 169-year-old curl contains 582 strands that are expected to yield answers to many questions about Beethoven's medical history and personality, including whether his deafness was caused by lead poisoning.

If hair can be so revealing, so can a look inside our checkbooks. If someone were to analyze, say, the last 582 entries in your checkbook, what would that data reveal about your finances? The results would be convicting for most of us!

Today's verses are embedded in one of the most intriguing of Jesus' money-related parables. We will study this parable again on

September 21, but today we want to close this first section of our studies on money and finance by looking at this exhortation.

Notice where Jesus put the emphasis in these verses. Monetary wealth was “small potatoes” to Him. Spiritual riches were the real stuff. Not that it isn’t important how we behave with our checkbook. Exactly the opposite, in fact. Our conduct with our finances helps to determine how much spiritual responsibility and privilege God can give us. That is why fiscal faithfulness is a requirement for elders and deacons (1 Tim. 3:3-5, 8, 12).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

As we begin to develop a biblical view of our finances, we must come to grips with the issue of contentment.

Jesus said if we can’t be trusted with a little, we can’t be trusted with a lot. We might also say if we aren’t content with a little, we won’t be happy with a lot. Counselor and Moody Press author Jim Logan puts it this way: “If you aren’t happy with what God has provided for you now, you won’t be happy with what He hasn’t provided for you yet.”

Luke 16:17 Galatians 3:6-199

It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law. - Luke 16:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

One of the most stifling defenses in football history was the “No-Name Defense” of the 1972 Miami Dolphins. The unit allowed only 18 touchdowns in 17 games, while intercepting 26 passes and sacking the quarterback 34 times. Though they had no big-name players, with the possible exception of linebacker Nick Buoniconti, they helped propel the Dolphins to what remains to this day the NFL’s only perfect season.

Perfection is a rare commodity, yet in today’s passage we see once again the perfection of the Word. Every detail matters, even the “least stroke of a pen,” as today’s verse affirms. No wonder God told Jeremiah: “Tell them everything I command you; do not omit a word” (Jer. 26:2).

The perfection of Scripture is seen in its details. Part of Paul’s argument in Galatians 3 turns on a minor grammatical point—the difference between singular and plural. “The promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed. The Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ” (v. 16; cf. Gen. 12:7). That is, the promises given to Abraham were fulfilled specifically in Christ (v. 19).

The perfection of Scripture is also seen in its overall themes. Justification by faith is not a new idea that suddenly sprouted in the New Testament, but one found throughout the Old Testament and Jewish history. Abraham was saved by faith, and all who believe in this way are children of Abraham (vv. 6-9).

The Law’s purpose was never to bring redemption, nor can it do so (vv. 10-14, 19). God had planned to save the Gentiles all along. The “one story” of the Bible is the story of God’s promise of salvation in Christ, available to all through faith. And as shown through Paul’s personification of the Word (v. Cool, God has given Scripture an active role to play in the unfolding of redemption history.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Many of us regularly use only one translation of the Bible. But different translations can often help us read Scripture in a fresh way—we may actually pay attention to the words since we can’t skim through familiar phrases. To explore and compare various English translations of the Bible, you could get a parallel edition, which shows four or more translations side by side. As you read, ask the Lord to show you truths in His Word that you may have missed before.

Luke 16:19-31

TODAY IN THE WORD

The Wall Street Journal reported last year on a new program at the veterinary school of a large midwestern university. Called “Peace of Mind,” the program allows people to arrange for the future care of their pets after the death of their owners. The university guarantees to provide first-rate medical care for “Fido” and “Fluff” for the rest of their lives, along with careful placement in good, loving homes. In return, a minimum contribution of \$25 per pet to the university is suggested, although the school says that figure is flexible.

If only some people would take their eternal destiny that seriously! The story of the rich man and Lazarus is a lesson in the perils of ignoring eternity until it is too late. In relating this story, Jesus also gave us a very sobering and intimate glimpse into heaven and hell.

This account is often called a parable, but it does not fit the normal parable style. It may be better to think of Lazarus and the rich man as actual people Jesus knew. One sobering thing to note here is that the rich man is not portrayed as especially evil or greedy or blasphemous. He just never got around to dealing with his need for salvation.

Once in hell, however, he became evangelistic (vv. 27-28). But the stark truth is here before us: men and women are lost outside of Jesus Christ (v. 31). The word translated ""hell"" in verse 23 is not the eternal lake of fire. Instead, it is the word ""Hades,"" the New Testament equivalent of the Hebrew word ""Sheol."" Both words often refer to the grave. Here the picture is of an intermediate state between death and the resurrection.

In other words, Luke 16 answers the question of what happens to unbelievers when they die. God has not yet resurrected the unsaved dead for judgment (Rev. 20:11-15), yet the rich man was in conscious torment in the flames and very much aware of events and people on earth.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The rich man was sure that if he came back from the grave in a spectacular miracle, his brothers would surely believe.

It's easy to think that the thing unbelievers really need to come to Christ is some spectacular miracle or testimony. But the Bible clearly says it is God's Word and the Holy Spirit that will overcome unbelief (see Rom. 1:16).

LUKE 17

Luke 17

Faith, according to Hebrews, "is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see" (11:1). But how do we live this out? Thankfully, many concrete examples are found in Scripture, especially in Hebrews 11, also known as the "Hall of Faith." Abel, for instance, offered his sacrifice in humble faith and God accepted it. Noah trusted the Lord and "built an ark to save his family." Abraham obeyed God and journeyed to a foreign land. Joseph anticipated the Exodus. Moses' parents protected him from the murderous intentions of their Egyptian enslavers.

Today's reading reveals five essential principles and practices of faith. First, faith means resisting and forgiving sin (vv. 1-5). Sin may be inevitable, but this doesn't remove human responsibility. Woe to one who causes a child to sin or refuses to forgive a repentant brother! In their response, "Increase our faith!" the disciples correctly perceived the difficulty of obeying these commands.

Second, faith means serving without looking for praise or reward (vv. 6-10). Service as a spiritual "duty" is not an inspiring or motivating message in today's world, but the fact is that God owes us nothing. Our work for His glory is proper and fitting and our duty and privilege to perform.

Third, faith means gratitude for God's incredible work in our lives (vv. 11-19). This is seen in the incident with the ten lepers, only one of whom (and a Samaritan at that!) came back to say "thank you" for his miraculous healing from a dreadful disease. Once again, Luke stresses overturned expectations.

Fourth, faith understands that the "kingdom of God" is a spiritual reality (vv. 20-21). The Pharisees and others were looking for a savior from the Roman occupation and a new Davidic golden age, but Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is in your midst" (v. 20). Fifth and finally, faith understands that the "kingdom of God" is both present and future (vv. 22-37). It is present in Jesus and in people's responses to Him, but it is also future in Jesus and His Second Coming.

Apply the Word

The return of Christ is imminent. By this, we don't mean that it will necessarily happen soon—after all, Scripture says, "About that day or hour no one knows" (Matt. 24:36). Rather, the imminent return of Christ means that it could happen at any time. Nothing else needs to happen first. It could be in the next minute, next week, next decade, or next century. Are we ready? No, if we're focused on temporal things and worldly concerns. Yes, if we're walking day by day with Christ in faith.

Luke 17:11-19

TODAY IN THE WORD

At the local post office a young man was approached by an elderly gentleman. "Sir," the older man explained, "my hand is not too steady today. Would you be so kind as to address a postcard for me?"

"Why, I'd be delighted to help!" the younger man replied.

The older man made a second request. "Would it be a great inconvenience to ask you to write a short note on the card?"

"Not at all," the young man insisted. So the older man dictated several short sentences.

When the young man finished writing, he inquired, "Is there anything else I can do for you?"

The older man took the card, studied it, frowned, and said rather curtly, "Yes, can you add one more note at the end?"

"Sure. What shall I say?"

"Say: 'P.S. Please excuse this messy handwriting!'"

We chuckle at such ingratitude. And yet how easy it is to fall into the habit of complaining. This is especially evident in our families. Even if we don't grumble at one another, we often forget to express appreciation.

Today's familiar story of Jesus encountering a group of lepers is a good reminder of our need to develop an ongoing attitude of gratitude. Ten men appeal to Jesus for help (vv. 11-13). All ten are healed (v. 14). But only one, a despised Samaritan (vv. 15-16), returns to thank Jesus.

Perhaps his status as a racial outcast enabled him to grasp the meaning of mercy and grace (vv. 17-18). Perhaps in all of his uncleanness, he recognized a profound truth: "Jesus doesn't owe me anything. As much as I hate this leprosy, I cannot honestly say I deserve healing. But I have nothing to lose. Who knows, maybe He will look on me with compassion."

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Have you thanked God today? Consider the blessings He has showered upon you and the wonderful relationships He has given to you. Each member of your family is a gift. Take a moment to do this exercise with your family. Take turns completing the statement "Right now I am thankful for _____. " Continue until you run out of thank-yous.

LUKE 18

Luke 18:33

On the third day he will rise again.

When her flu-like symptoms refused to go away, doctors discovered that Debbie Habermas had stomach cancer. Four months after the diagnosis she died. Her husband Gary, a scholar and Christian apologist, wrote: "During Debbie's suffering, I took refuge in the truth of Jesus' resurrection." The fact that Jesus rose from the dead gave him hope he would see Debbie again.

The hope of the gospel is grounded in the resurrection of Christ. Without the reality of His resurrection, the suffering of Jesus would be meaningless (1 Cor. 15:17). Jesus' resurrection was a bodily resurrection. Jesus was not only seen by His disciples, they also touched Him (Matt. 28:9). Jesus rose with the same body that was His during His earthly ministry. The Savior's resurrected body still bore the scars of His suffering (John 20:27). He showed the disciples His hands and feet and ate a piece of broiled fish to prove He was not a ghost (Luke 24:37-42).

These actions prove that the resurrection is essential to our understanding of the nature of Christ. Through the resurrection the Father and the Spirit demonstrated that Jesus of Nazareth was both man and God. Jesus was shown to be the Son of God in power by His resurrection from the dead (Rom. 1:4).

But the resurrection of Jesus is also essential to the self-understanding of those who are in Christ. If you belong to Christ, you should see yourself as united with Him in both His death and His resurrection. As a result, you should "count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:11). When we see ourselves in the resurrection of Christ, we recognize that we are under new management. We refuse to let sin be the reigning principle in our lives and we place ourselves at the disposal of the One who has brought us from death to life.

Apply the Word

How do you see yourself? Write Romans 6:11-14 on a notecard and tape it to your mirror. Every time you look into the mirror, these verses will remind you to view yourself through the lens of the resurrection of Christ. They will also remind you to offer the parts of our body as instruments of righteousness throughout the day.

Luke 18

Author and pastor John Piper called humility a "shy virtue." What did he mean? "Our humility, if there is any at all, is based on our finiteness, our fallibility, and our sinfulness. But the eternal Son of God was not finite. He was not fallible. And he was not sinful. So,

unlike our humility, Jesus' humility originated some other way." To put it simply, He chose to be humble (Mark 10:45; Phil. 2:6–8). "What defines Jesus' humility is the fact that it is mainly a conscious act of putting himself in a lowly, servant role for the good of others. . . . [W]e are called to join Jesus in this conscious self-humbling and servanthood."

Humility is a key dimension of citizenship in God's kingdom, including humility in prayer (vv. 9–14). To some smug listeners, Jesus told a story built around a contrast. On one side stood a religious leader. His prayer was prideful. He boasted of his good works and compared himself favorably to others. On the other side a tax collector stood at a distance. His prayer was humble and repentant. He confessed his unworthiness and begged God for mercy. It was this man rather than the other who "went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (v. 14). The tax collector understood that we are to receive the kingdom "like a little child" (v. 17).

We should also pray with persistence and purity of heart. Jesus made the first point with a story about a widow and an unjust judge (vv. 1–8). If a widow could obtain justice under unfavorable circumstances through simple persistence, how much more can we expect the same from our just and loving God? The blind man who would not be shushed and shouted louder for healing certainly discovered this (vv. 35–43). The issue of purity of heart is shown in Jesus' encounter with the rich young man (vv. 18–30). Though apparently in search of the kingdom, the fact was that his heart was attached more to his wealth than to God's truth.

Apply the Word

Some of us would rather "achieve" the kingdom than "receive" the kingdom (v. 17). Even though we know in our heads that salvation is all about God's grace and not what we deserve, we still want to earn something. Perhaps we do good deeds in an attempt to "repay" God. Perhaps we take ideas like discipleship and sacrifice and turn them into spiritual achievements to take pride in. But in our own strength we can do nothing at all—there's no room for pride in God's kingdom!

Luke 18:1-14

In God I trust, I will not be afraid. - Psalm 56:11

TODAY IN THE WORD

What do the founders of McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken, the inventor of the light bulb, and the widow in today's story all have in common? If you guessed "persistence," you're right! Before Thomas Edison turned on the first light bulb, he endured nine thousand failed attempts! Apparently, Colonel Sanders heard "No!" 1,009 times before anyone was sold on his "secret recipe." And Ray Kroc, the founder of McDonald's, lived by a simple formula: #1 - never give up. #2 - always persevere. #3 - don't forget #1!

Luke makes it clear that Jesus told the parable of the widow and the judge (vv. 2-5) to teach the disciples about perseverance in prayer. When we first read this parable, it's easy to think that God is somehow like this heartless judge and to conclude that if we just pester God long enough, He'll finally give us what we want! But a closer look at verses 6 and 7 shows that Jesus intends something else from this parable.

At the end of Luke 17, Jesus taught that the coming of the kingdom of God would arrive unexpectedly. Jesus told today's parable to teach His disciples never to give up praying for justice and righteousness . . . especially in the midst of a world that can be as cruel and heartless as the judge in this parable. The lesson from the widow, who would have been especially vulnerable to injustice, is not perfecting the technique of badgering, but rather never forsaking the pursuit of justice. In Luke 18:1, Jesus made it clear that the alternative to persevering in prayer is giving up. That's why He asked the question about finding faith at His Second Coming (v. Cool. The lesson here is to persevere in faithfulness even though we live in an unjust world..

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It's easy to grow discouraged by the injustice around us. Today's parable presents us with two options: we can either give up or we can pray, faithfully anticipating Jesus' Second Coming. The faith that the Son of Man longs to find upon His return is faith that has persevered in trusting Him to make all things right and to judge those who have acted wickedly. And as we're praying for justice, the parable of the tax collector encourages us to remain humble, knowing that God has had mercy on us.

Luke 18:1–8

Petition: The Parable of the Widow and Judge

Grant me justice against my adversary. Luke 18:3

Today's parable of the widow and the judge is often read as an argument for the power of persistent prayer. But we'll see that paying close attention to the text will give us a truer picture of our gracious God.

An important observation is that the unjust judge is presented in contrast—not in comparison—to God. Our heavenly Father never ignores a widow's petition. Her persistence underscores the difference between her relationship with the judge and our relationship with God. Unlike the widow who was rejected by the judge, we are welcomed by God to bring our petitions to Him. Like the widow, however, we often wait.

There are no easy answers to the question of why we wait. It's tempting to blame our own lack of persistence. It does seem that the widow's stubbornness finally wins the result she seeks. But this interpretation hinges on a discarded translation of the Greek word *hypopiaztein* at the end of 18:5. Some English renderings of this word make the judge finally act out of fear that she will wear him out. Most scholars now agree the better translation reflects action based on fear that she will shame or attack him. Fearing that the widow's begging would reflect poorly on him, the judge's decision to act was as self-centered as his inaction, another point of contrast to God.

If Jesus' parable promoted begging, it would make God no better than an unjust judge. Jesus' lesson is the opposite. God listens. The fact that we often wait for answers is not a reflection on us, but on the prerogative of our good and holy God. We exhibit our faithfulness and trust in Him by praying patiently, believing He is just and hears our prayers even the first time we utter them.

Apply the Word

Reasons, even disheartening ones, are often more comfortable than lingering questions. But God encourages us in unexpected ways. If you are waiting for an answer to prayer, reflect on the last month and make a list of blessings (a beautiful sunset, conversation with a friend) that you've experienced. Pray through the list, praising God from whom all blessings flow

Luke 18:1-8

When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth? - Luke 18:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

If you have been a Christian very long, you know that one of the great enemies of prayer is "busyness." These are the distractions of everyday life that seem important at the time, or that we hide behind to keep from facing ourselves or God. In *The Transforming Power of Prayer*, author James Houston says busyness can be "an addictive drug...which acts to repress our inner fears and personal anxieties." When this happens, Houston says, we become obsessed with outward appearances and neglect our internal life.

In the parable of Luke 18, Jesus gives us a great motivation to set aside busyness and be tenacious in our prayer lives. Several times this month we will encounter this fundamental truth about prayer: God is moved to action by the persistent prayers of His people. Jesus often teaches by painting a contrast. Far from identifying God with an uncaring judge, Jesus set the character of His Father at the extreme opposite end of the moral spectrum. The question raised by the parable is an important one. If an uncaring, earthly authority can be moved to action by a persistent petitioner, wouldn't our caring, loving God be even more moved to act on our behalf when we cry out to Him?

The answer to that question, Jesus said, was in the mouth of the unjust judge (v. 6). One of the puzzles of prayer for many people is the issue of asking God repeatedly for something when He already knows how He is going to answer. Why does God tell us to "always pray and not give up?"

In today's key verse, Jesus gives us one answer by posing a question of His own. Persistent, believing prayer--the kind that simply will not quit--is a definite faith-builder. Something happens within us as we bring the burdens and requests of our hearts to God day after day. For one thing, our faith is exercised and grows stronger. And the more we pray, the more the Holy Spirit can prepare us for God's answer.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus said that the answer to prayer would come "quickly" (v. 6). There is a lesson and an encouragement for us contained here. First, the lesson. The promise is not that the answer will come immediately, the way we put something in the microwave and it's finished in four minutes. Instead, Jesus is saying that when the answer does begin to come, it will unfold quickly. Next, the encouragement. God knows the perfect time to bring the answer, and He is listening carefully to the prayers of His chosen ones. We can trust His love, wisdom, and timing!

Luke 18:9-13

Petition: The Prayers of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

All those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Luke 18:14

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote about an experience he had while attending a service in the historic Sacre Coeur cathedral in France. “The people in the church were almost exclusively from Montmartre; prostitutes and their men went to mass, submitted to all the ceremonies; it was an enormously impressive picture, and once again one could see quite clearly how close, precisely through their fate and guilt, these most heavily burdened people are to the heart of the gospel. I have long thought that the Taentzienstrasse [Berlin’s red-light district] would be an extremely fruitful field for church work. It’s much easier for me to imagine a praying murderer, a praying prostitute, than a vain person praying. Nothing is so at odds with prayer as vanity.”

In today’s Scripture, Jesus told the story of two men—a Pharisee and a tax collector—who went to the temple to pray. Pharisees were highly respected spiritual leaders in Jesus’ day. They dedicated themselves to studying Scripture and holy living. While we might think of tax collectors as faceless paper pushers, in Jesus’ world they were considered extortionists and traitors.

The surprise in this story is that the tax collector, not the Pharisee, knew how to pray in a way that pleased God. There is no sense that the Pharisee was lying about his own actions; he went above and beyond what the law required. But his confident and haughty attitude undercut any claim he had to righteousness. The tax collector, aware that his actions fell short, humbled himself and was justified before God. Humble people do not compare themselves to others; they do not find satisfaction in the ways they are superior. Instead, humble people rest only in God’s mercy. This pleases our merciful God.

Apply the Word - Do you identify more with the Pharisee or the tax collector? If the Pharisee, read Ephesians 2:8–9 and ask God to instill in you a spirit of humility that recognizes your debt to His grace and mercy. If the tax collector, read Psalm 51:17 and pray with confidence knowing that God will hear your plea for help and forgiveness no matter what you have done.

LUKE 19

Luke 19:1–10

A Sinful Dinner Host: A Tax Collector Named Zacchaeus

I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. - Jn 13:15

The first Sunday that Kathleen visited church, she created quite a stir. She was wearing sweatpants that looked at least one size too small and bedroom slippers. No one was sure how she had arrived at church—had someone dropped her off? Did she walk? When Kathleen requested prayer, another woman from the church stood with her and held her hand. Over the next few months, Dana befriended Kathleen, who had suffered a series of tragedies and was destitute. Dana helped provide Kathleen with clothes and shoes that fit, made sure she had transportation to church, and invited her to her home. Today, Kathleen is a valued prayer warrior in the church.

Confusion and outrage when someone “undesirable” shows up in church still happens. Jesus experienced that kind of reaction, too, when he addressed Zacchaeus, a tax collector. Did Jesus realize how offensive Zacchaeus was? Did He care at all about His reputation?

Jesus knew that Zacchaeus’s community despised him. He was a pawn of the Roman authority, authorized to extort his neighbors for as much money as he wanted as long as the government got their cut. And though Jesus understood exactly who Zacchaeus was, He did not avoid him. Rather, when Jesus spotted him in a tree, He made a beeline toward him.

Zacchaeus was shocked that Jesus wanted to have a conversation with him. In fact, Jesus insisted on receiving hospitality from Zacchaeus by visiting his home. This relationship with Jesus produced a result that exclusion and shunning did not: repentance! Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus into his home, and Jesus welcomed Zacchaeus into God’s family.

Apply the Word - If we’re honest, most often we would prefer to keep our distance from folks who make us uncomfortable. We can’t imagine inviting one of “those people” into our homes or building a relationship with them. This week, how will you imitate Jesus? Who do you find scandalous or repellent? As the Holy Spirit prompts you, offer them an invitation to grace.

Luke 19:1-10

The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost. - Luke 19:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

Charles Morton was a young man who had “no knowledge of God” when he entered the Civil War. He led a wicked life in the army, drinking and gambling and bragging that he could “blaspheme the name of God in more ways than any other man about.” Morton lost his right arm in the war and went to Chicago to recuperate, but he continued his drinking and carousing.

Charles Morton came to work and live at the Chicago YMCA, where his roommate—who knew Dwight Moody—led Morton to Christ. Moody saw promise in Morton and nurtured him in evangelism and personal work. Eventually, Charles Morton became assistant pastor of the church that D. L. Moody had helped to establish.

Charles Morton, the Civil War veteran and pastor, and Zacchaeus, the first-century Jewish tax collector, were worlds apart—except that both men desperately needed Jesus Christ, and both met Him.

The story of Zacchaeus brings us again to the term “sinner,” a word we have encountered several times this month. When Jesus went to dinner at Zacchaeus’s house, the people of Jericho muttered, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner” (v. 7).

This word appears in quotes in the Gospels to indicate that it was a term the people of that day, most notably the Pharisees, used to designate undesirables. Tax collectors were sometimes specifically mentioned alongside sinners, since they received special scorn from their fellow Jews. For example, Jesus was accused of being “a friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Matt. 11:19).

Jesus was just that, and for the best reason of all. They were the kind of people He came to seek and to save. Zacchaeus’s conversion became the occasion for one of Jesus’ definitive statements about His ministry on earth (v. 10; we’ll study another of these statements tomorrow).

The exact moment of this wealthy man’s conversion is not recorded, but Zacchaeus’s pledge of generous giving and return of stolen money gave evidence of his transformation. Jesus acknowledged the change of heart Zacchaeus had just experienced, and then reminded His listeners that this was exactly why He had come.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It was no accident that Jesus passed by the exact place where Zacchaeus was waiting. Jesus put Himself in the path of sinners. He planned His steps to take Him where the spiritual needs were.

This weekend, why not review your contacts with the unbelievers around you? Are you taking advantage of opportunities to meet neighbors, or to establish friendships with co-workers? In other words, are you putting yourself in the path of sinners so that the Lord can use you to reach them?

Luke 19:10 Matthew 18:10-14

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. - Luke 19:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

The top-grossing film in the United States in 1990 was an improbable tale of a boy who found himself in a reversal of the typical “young hero lost in the world” adventure. Instead of running away like Pinocchio or suffering from amnesia like Anastasia, Kevin McCallister finds himself abandoned in the place he knows best. Upon realizing his absence, his mother spends the entire film scrambling to reunite with her son who had been left sadly (and comically) Home Alone.

Regardless of the circumstances, loving parents will do anything to find a child who is lost or separated from them. In today’s reading, Jesus compared that love and longing to a shepherd searching for a lost sheep. The specific relationship of which He spoke was the Father’s love for “these little ones,” the children he had gathered around Him as He discussed the kingdom of heaven (see v. 2).

Speaking of searching for lost things, as you read you may find yourself searching for verse 11. Most ancient manuscripts do not include the verse sometimes included there (probably erroneously), a transcription of Luke 19:10: “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

But the “lost” Jesus referred to in this case is probably more an example of a young child being led astray than a wayward believer or a prodigal son equivalent from recent studies—although God’s love for anyone of any age would be exceedingly great. The point here is that the Father would rejoice greatly specifically for a young child brought to the knowledge of Him.

It’s possible that “the other ninety-nine” refers to those already secure in their faith. God has a special happiness reserved for those at a fragile age of impressionability (vv. 13-14). Jesus also mentioned an interesting point about angels—some commentators believe that He indicates that children have angels watching over them (v. 10). Though other scholars aren’t sure that this points to some notion of guardian angels for children, the larger point of God’s deep love and care for children is clear. If our Father devotes such concern for little ones, we certainly should value young people as well.

APPLY THE WORD

Much attention and resources in church planning are devoted to adult ministries and outreach, which are crucial to the Great Commission. But after reading of the special love God has for young children, we should also desire to bring boys and girls to faith and to foster their spiritual development. Consider supporting the children's ministries of your church, whether by volunteering your time to teach, make snacks, or even pray for the children involved.

Luke 19:1-27

At the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization held last year in Cape Town, South Africa, an 18-year-old Korean high school student gave a stirring testimony. Born in Pyongyang, North Korea, she was the only child of a wealthy and well-connected family. When they were politically persecuted, they fled to China. There they met Chinese Christians and Korean and American missionaries who introduced her parents to faith in Christ. Her mother soon died of leukemia. Her father sought to take the gospel back to North Korea, but was imprisoned and is presumed martyred. She, too, received Christ and shares this passion to see His gospel flourish in the physically and spiritually impoverished land of her birth.

This is also the heart of her heavenly Father, and the very reason for the Incarnation: "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (v. 10). This verse is often described as the theme verse for Luke's entire Gospel.

It is epitomized in the story of Zacchaeus (vv. 1–10). As a chief tax collector in the Roman system, he almost certainly was corrupt and locally notorious for his sinfulness. Yet God had moved in his heart until he took the undignified step of climbing a tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus.

Jesus knew he would be there and took the initiative to invite Himself to dinner. Though some would criticize this move, "to seek and to save the lost" was exactly why He had come. Zacchaeus responded with immediate faith, concretely demonstrating his repentance of sin by paying restitution and giving to the poor. These actions didn't save him, but they were proof of God's saving work in his heart.

Like Zacchaeus, we who are "found" seek to be faithful followers of Christ (vv. 11–27; cf. Matt. 25:14–30). Being faithful in our stewardship of resources is one such way. One servant in the parable failed to manage his talent well and stood condemned. The other two, however, obeyed faithfully and were ready on the day of the master's return (cf. 1 Cor. 4:5).

Apply the Word

Thanks to modern technology, you can see and hear the North Korean student's testimony. Video of it is available both at the Lausanne Congress Web site, [http:// conversation.lausanne.org/en/ conversations/detail/11671](http://conversation.lausanne.org/en/conversations/detail/11671), and on YouTube. (www.youtube.com). Her testimony of suffering and faith will stir your soul and encourage you in your daily walk. It is a vigorous witness to the power of the gospel and the love of God.

Luke 19:28-48

When Roman generals returned from their conquests, they were welcomed back with a victory parade. The general would ride in a gilded chariot, prisoners in chains walking before him and soldiers marching in ranks and carts loaded with plunder behind him. Two slaves would also ride in the chariot, one holding a laurel wreath as a symbol of triumph and one whispering a warning in the general's ear, "All fame is fleeting."

When Jesus made his Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem at the beginning of Passion Week, the climax of His mission of redemption lay just ahead. The people who celebrated Him on Sunday would be shouting for His crucifixion by Friday. Because of this, the Triumphal Entry was a bittersweet event.

The sweetness came as the event fulfilled messianic prophecy, when Jesus rode the colt of a donkey into Jerusalem. The animal symbolized the kingship of David, and the people responded with praise and worship, shouting, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" (v. 38; Ps. 118:26). But it was bitter because Jesus knew He had come to Jerusalem to suffer and die. He understood well that His fortunes, humanly speaking, would soon be reversed. He also knew that the Pharisees had rejected Him and were looking for an opportunity to kill Him. They clearly recognized the meaning of what was happening, but they refused to accept it as true. Rather than acknowledging the Messiah, they asked Jesus to rebuke the people (vv. 39–40).

More sweetness is found when Jesus told them that the people's praise was appropriate and true; "the stones will cry out" if they did not (v. 40). As for the people, they were riveted by His teaching, and the good news of the kingdom continued to be preached and believed. But there was also more bitter sorrow when Jesus wept over Jerusalem, understanding the tragedy of Israel's rejection of Him and seeing ahead to the city's future suffering and defeat. He was also angry at the spiritual abuse of the temple—the court of the Gentiles had been turned into a "den of robbers" when it should have been a place to seek the Lord.

Apply the Word

During this earthly life, the Christian experience can often be bittersweet. The bitter includes suffering, rejection by the world, battles with sin and temptation, and the rigors of pilgrimage. The sweet includes the reality of redemption, the love of God, fellowship with His people, and the joys of pilgrimage. As we walk in this way, we follow in the footsteps of our Lord: "Wisdom is like honey for you: If you find it, there is a future hope for you" (Prov. 24:14).

LUKE 20

LUKE 20

Before condemned prisoners are executed, it has become customary to allow them to choose a last meal. Many request fast food or comfort food such as fried chicken, meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and ice cream. Seafood is also popular, while others ask for dishes their mother made them as children. Officials report receiving many phone calls asking about prisoners' last meals, so many that at least three states have put final meal menus on their Web sites.

The Jewish religious leaders planned no such kindness as a last meal for Jesus. Their plot to kill Him was hateful and unjust. They had been looking for an excuse to do so—if they could get Him to say something controversial or unpopular, the people would turn on Him.

To this end, they set three traps in today's reading. The first trap was a lose–lose question about authority (vv. 1–8). If Jesus said His authority came from God, it might look like pride or blasphemy; but if He said from men, it would disappoint the crowds. He refused to play the game, however; His question regarding John the Baptist was a way of saying, "I see what you're trying to do." His parable of the tenants was a public indictment of their rejection of Him as Messiah (vv. 9–19).

The Pharisees' second trap was a political question (vv. 20–26). It was another lose–lose scenario: If Jesus said not to pay taxes, He would brand Himself a rebel, and the Roman imperial machinery would kick into gear and crush Him. If He said to pay taxes, He would look like a Roman collaborator and lose the people's respect.

The third trap question involved theology (vv. 27–40). The Sadducees thought they had found a contradiction in Scripture regarding resurrection and marriage and asked their question in the form of an extreme hypothetical scenario. Jesus told them their question came from an entirely wrong understanding of heaven and only revealed their ignorance of God's kingdom. As usual, Jesus got the last word and identified Himself from Scripture as both David's descendant and Lord (vv. 41–44).

Apply the Word

Two thousand years after Jesus walked the earth, some things haven't changed. The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection, and on this Resurrection Sunday the sad fact is that many modern individuals do not believe in it either. They think they know better. The foundations of our faith appear to the world as foolishness, but Christ's Resurrection and our own future resurrections are at the heart of the Christian faith (1 Corinthians 15).

LUKE 21

Luke 21

Did you know that "once in a blue moon" actually happens? A "blue moon" is the second full moon in a month, an event that occurs about once every two–and–a–half years. To ring in the year 2010, a "blue moon" occurred on New Year's Eve in North America, South America, Europe, and Africa. That hadn't happened since 1990, and the next New Year's Eve "blue moon" won't occur until the year 2028.

As rare as a "blue moon" is, the advents of Christ are even rarer. According to Scripture, just two are planned for all of recorded history! From our vantage point in time, we look back on His first coming and forward to His second. In the Olivet Discourse, our passage today, Jesus spoke of these matters (vv. 5–38; cf. Matthew 24).

One lesson for His disciples was not to trust in church building projects, so to speak. Jesus' shocking statement about the destruction of the temple was literally fulfilled in A.D. 70, when the Romans burned it to the ground. The crowds were focused on looking for a messiah to liberate them from Roman occupation, but Jesus wanted His disciples to understand the deeper nature of redemption and God's plan for the world.

A second lesson He wanted them to learn was not to trust in impostors. Many false messiahs and teachers would show up during the "end times," and believers would need to be discerning and rely on God's wisdom to know how to respond. A third lesson was that there would be "signs of the times," including both social (persecution and wars) and natural signs (earthquakes and famines).

The climax of history will be the Second Coming of Christ (v. 27). The first advent was about rejection and redemption, but the next

will be about power and glory. How should we respond to all this? The point is not to try to decode the signs as if they were a puzzle, though we should be aware of passing events (vv. 29–31). Rather, we should remain steadfast when the going gets rough. God's love will preserve our eternal lives no matter what happens.

Apply the Word

What is the key to the end times? At a practical, everyday level, the answer can be found in the story that opens this chapter (vv. 1–4). The widow who put all her money into the temple offering trusted the Lord with all she had, without reservation. This is the sign of a heart that is not weighed down with the cares of this world (v. 34). We, too, will be ready for Christ's return and found faithful if we trust Him with all we have, all we are, and all we do.

Luke 21:1-4

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 1944, the war-torn villages of Europe were filled with orphans. One morning an American soldier noticed a young boy staring through the window of a pastry shop. The boy hadn't eaten in days. Each time the baker put a new batch of rolls on his counter, the boy licked his lips and groaned.

The soldier knew what he should do. He entered the bakery and returned moments later with a sack full of warm pastries. He handed the bag to the hungry child. As he turned to walk away, he felt a tug on his jacket. "Mister," the little boy inquired, "are you God?"

In a stingy world that advocates getting as its goal, giving sets us apart. In the words of Chuck Swindoll, "We are never more like God than when we give."

Consider the brief incident in Luke 21:1-4. With His disciples, Jesus observed the goings-on in a part of the Temple called the Court of the Women. The treasury was located here, and people were bringing gifts and offerings. Rich people were seen making sizable donations (v. 1). But it was the contribution of a poor widow that caught Jesus' attention. She offered two very small copper coins—a mere pittance (v. 2). Yet Jesus singled out this anonymous woman for a quick lesson on generosity.

What made her gift so special, so pleasing to the Lord? First, it was done quietly. No great fanfare, just a simple act. Second, it was done willingly. At Passover season, voluntary offerings were customary. Most likely this was a free-will offering, not a tithe. Third, it was done sacrificially. The rich gave "out of their wealth" (the word used here is the same word used to describe the leftover fish and bread on those occasions when Jesus fed the multitudes). Jesus realized that the widow's two coins were "all she had to live on" (v. 4).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

God wants us to develop the quality of generosity. How much we give is not so important as that we give and that we do so with the right attitude. Perhaps the acronym G-I-V-E can help you make generosity a cherished family value in your home:

Go to God in prayer. Confess any greedy or materialistic attitudes. Thank Him for His blessings.

Invent new and creative ways to give. For example, have your family save its change each month and sponsor a hungry child from a developing nation.

Volunteer your time and resources to serve God and others. Open your home. Make your mini-van available.

Luke 21:1-4

With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as much as they could understand. - Mark 4:33

TODAY IN THE WORD

It has been noted that great literature can be regarded as an "experiment in living." Characters enter situations and speak and act based on their perceptions, motivations, and beliefs—which is to say, they live out their worldviews. The story's outcomes are the results of the "experiment," the effects and consequences of living out the worldviews. Good readers know that what is required next is a response from them. They must interact with the characters and the author, weighing in with their own observations about the "experiment" conducted in the story.

In just this way, in today's reading Jesus acted as a "narrator," treating the widow He observed in the temple as a "character" in a story that He wanted His disciples to study. He did this in yesterday's reading with the rich young ruler, and we find Him doing it in today's reading as well. The "moral" of this story was the woman's sacrificial giving and trust, as her two coins were all she had to

live on.

In addition to learning the principles Jesus taught at such times, we can also benefit from examining His teaching methods. He observed life keenly and insightfully. He used real-life situations as object lessons in spiritual truth, and He created parables, metaphors, and analogies to help His followers understand His meanings. He seized teachable moments, calling His disciples' attention to people and situations they might otherwise have overlooked or misunderstood (see v. 5).

In today's incident, He taught by contrast: the rich and their gifts versus the widow and her gift. He penetrated beneath the surface—despite appearances, her gift was superior. He noted the socioeconomic element, her poverty, as well as the spiritual element, her faith. He added God's evaluation of her gift as "more," according to the "last shall be first" principle we have already encountered.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

In light of the lesson about giving Jesus taught His disciples in today's reading, and after considering what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 8:1–15 on the same topic, examine your own giving habits. Does your giving honor the Lord? Does it demonstrate faith in His provision and goodness? Is it sacrificial? Do you recognize that you are only the steward of what the Lord has given you?

LUKE 22

Luke 22:1-46

In today's reading, Jesus' disciples were guilty of pandiculation. This seldom-used English word means, "Stretching the body and extremities when drowsy or tired, usually accompanied by yawning." It can also be a verb, "pandiculate," or an agent noun, "pandiculator." The Latin root is pandiculari, meaning "to stretch one's self." While His closest friends unhelpfully pandiculated, Jesus prayed fervently in the Garden of Gethsemane (vv. 39–46). Knowing what would happen, and why, didn't necessarily make things easier—He was in such agony that He sweat drops of blood. Nonetheless, the core of His prayer and of His entire life was, "Not my will, but [God's] be done" (v. 42).

Just prior, Jesus had shared the Last Supper with His disciples and spoken quite plainly about His impending death. Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, had gone to the Pharisees and agreed to betray the Lord when an opportunity presented itself. Satan entered him, not against his will but as a result of his choices, and spurred the plot forward. The thirty pieces of silver do not seem to be a sufficient motive for Judas' betrayal, but they are an indication of his low character. Jesus knew what was going on and revealed during dinner that one of them would betray Him (vv. 21–22) and that Peter would deny Him three times (v. 34), facts which no doubt added to His emotional burden.

As they shared the Passover meal, Jesus spoke to His disciples of His coming suffering, death, and resurrection, the fulfillment of Isaiah 53 (v. 3–7), and the redeeming power of His blood, soon to be shed for them and for all of us. As this would be the last close fellowship He would be able to share with them before His death, these were the matters closest to His heart. As part of the meal and the teaching, He instituted a "new covenant" and what we today call communion or the Lord's Table (vv. 19–20). Though the "new covenant" meant that nothing would ever be the same, the disciples' unfortunate response was to renew an old debate over which of them was the greatest.

Apply the Word

Jesus taught about servant leadership (vv. 25–27). Those who view power and authority in worldly ways use it to seek their own advantage, to command respect, and to make themselves look good. But with God, power and authority are for different purposes, namely, to serve others. Jesus Himself showed the way—His divine power and authority culminated in Him presenting His life as the once-for-all sacrifice for sin (Heb. 9:26).

Luke 22:7-20

Do this in remembrance of me. - Luke 22:19

TODAY IN THE WORD

Dr. Henry Heimlich, a thoracic surgeon, was alarmed to read that choking was the sixth leading cause of accidental death. Researching a remedy, he devised a simple technique to put pressure on the diaphragm in order to expel food or other objects from choking victims' throats. Known internationally as the "Heimlich Maneuver," in the past thirty years his technique has saved countless lives around the world.

To save physical lives is a doctor's purpose; to give spiritual life is our Savior's purpose. He did it by sacrificing Himself for our sins, and in today's reading He taught His disciples both the meaning of what He was about to do and how to commemorate it.

The symbolism of the Lord's Supper is straightforward. The bread represents Jesus' body, broken for us. The wine represents His blood, shed for us (vv. 19–20). Jesus Himself makes this clear at the Last Supper (Matt. 26:26-29). The shocking power of this symbolism is also stated by Jesus in John 6:56: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him."

In addition to baptism, communion or the Lord's Supper has historically been considered an ordinance or sacrament of the church. "Do this in remembrance of me," Jesus said, and so we, too, use bread and wine as symbols of His body and blood. When Paul recounted the core events, the solemnity and formality of his language indicated that communion had been celebrated from the church's earliest days (1 Cor. 11:23–26). It marks the "new Passover" or "new covenant"—just as God redeemed Israel from slavery under the blood of lambs, so He has redeemed us from sin with the Lamb's blood (1 Cor. 5:7).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

In light of the importance of obeying Christ's command, "Do this in remembrance of me," make a plan to prepare your soul for your church's next observance of communion. You might re-read Gospel accounts of His Passion, listen to or sing sacred music focusing on redemption, visit a museum to contemplate classic paintings of the Crucifixion, or another idea of your choosing.

Luke 22:7-34, 54-62

TODAY IN THE WORD

Many stories circulated in nineteenth-century Washington concerning President Martin Van Buren's ability to avoid taking sides on whatever issue was before him. It is said that the term "non-committalism" became a popular term in the capital to describe Van Buren, who was elected in 1837.

One story tells of a man who accepted a bet that he could make Van Buren admit the sun rises in the east. But Van Buren was equal to the task. Concerning the sun's rising, he replied, "As I never get up till after dawn, I can't really say."

No one would ever accuse the apostle Peter of "non-committalism"—over-committalism, maybe! On the evening of the Last Supper, Peter made a commitment he couldn't keep because it was made in the power of his flesh.

Jesus knew Peter would betray Him three times; so before Peter even speaks, Jesus addressed His impetuous disciple. The words of verses 31-32 must have seemed enigmatic to Peter and the others at the time.

Peter obviously didn't catch on. He was full of confidence (v. 33). But he was about to lose a spiritual battle with the enemy, and Jesus wanted to make sure Peter's wound wouldn't be fatal.

Peter's betrayal happened that same night; and Luke notes poignantly that Jesus "turned and looked straight at Peter," who went out and wept bitterly (vv. 61-62).

What a tremendous lesson we can learn from this incident! Jesus mentioned the desire of Satan to grind us to flour. The devil is not impressed or deterred by human boasts or resolutions.

But an encouraging truth is that Jesus was praying for Peter. He even reassured His lead fisherman that he still had a great ministry to accomplish. This text reminds us of the dangers of running headlong into spiritual battle in our own strength. The enemy is too great for us to defeat with the weapons of the flesh.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Most of us make resolutions about all the good things we are going to do for the Lord. That's human nature.

There's nothing wrong with resolving to pray more or study your Bible every day. In fact, we want to encourage you—as we often do about the middle of the month—to renew your commitment to daily study with your Bible and Today in the Word.

Luke 22:24-34

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. - Psalm 42:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

The story is told of a Christian pastor on a plane trip. Near him a man sat thumbing through some cards and moving his lips. Supposing that the man was also a believer, the pastor asked him if he were memorizing something. The man replied that he had been praying. Excited, the pastor said that he also prayed. Then the man said that he had a specific focus for his prayer. "I'm praying for the downfall of Christian pastors."

You can well imagine this pastor's shock. Most believers are unaware of the spiritual warfare around them. But Jesus was clear about this: Satan actively targets individual believers, especially leaders, for downfall.

The conversation recorded in Luke 22 between Jesus and Peter occurred near the end of Jesus' ministry. In fact, the disciples had just finished their last meal with Jesus, when they began arguing about who was greatest among them. It's particularly sad that this happened at the end of their time with Jesus. It reminds us that we're always vulnerable to pride.

To quell their dispute, Jesus reminded them that leadership in His kingdom wasn't like worldly kingdoms. Gentile kings went to great lengths to impress upon their subjects their superiority. Sometimes they presented themselves as gods, other times they used brutal force. Leadership for the Lord, however, was 180 degrees opposite. Jesus taught what some people today call "servant leadership"—leading by serving.

Leadership in Jesus' kingdom first meant laying aside one's pride. But second it meant realizing one's vulnerability to spiritual attack (v. 32). Peter rashly denied that anything could keep him from following the Lord. This blindness had serious consequences. Only a few hours after he and Jesus spoke, Peter denied the Lord three times.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Leaders among God's people have always been targets for spiritual attack. Both Peter and Paul experienced intense times of spiritual opposition.

He humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! - Philippians 2:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

Charles Spurgeon, the noted nineteenth-century preacher, once asked, "Is it not a curious thing that, whenever God means to make a man great, He always breaks him in pieces first?"

Hebrews 5 says much the same thing regarding the life of Jesus. He learned obedience through His suffering (v. Cool. We know that Jesus has always been perfect, but in His humanity, Jesus was utterly dependent upon the Father and submitted to Him completely. Having trusted Him to the point of death on the Cross, Jesus became the source of salvation for all who would obey Him (v. 9).

Today's passage from Hebrews also says that Jesus' prayers were heard because of His "reverent submission" (v. 7). And in today's passage from Luke, we see just how fully Jesus submitted to the Father. Truly, Jesus lived out what He taught His disciples to pray: "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10).

Yesterday we focused on Jesus' agony in Gethsemane; today we'll focus on His obedience. Luke's account adds some details that aren't in either Matthew or Mark. First, Luke says that an angel ministered to Jesus, further indicating the intensity of Jesus' wrestling in prayer. Luke goes on to say that instead of retreating from this battle, Jesus prayed even more earnestly (v. 44). As His anguish increased, Jesus didn't pull back, but rather turned His entire being toward what God was asking of Him.

We don't know how long Jesus prayed that night, but it had to have been at least several hours. All three Gospel accounts indicate that Jesus rose from prayer fully resolved to carry out what the Father asked. Both Matthew and Mark record that when He finished praying, Jesus said, "Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!" (Matt. 26:46; Mark 14:42), purposefully walking toward Judas.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The hardest prayer we can pray is "not my will, but Your will." Learning to submit to God is a lifelong process. It's easy to think we're submissive and obedient to God's will when circumstances are favorable. But when hard times come into our lives and we're forced to set aside our own dreams and to trust God, it gets much harder. As we contemplate the price that Jesus paid for us on the Cross, He becomes our constant reminder of a will fully submitted to the Father.

Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.

The story of Christ's time in the Garden of Gethsemane is deeply unsettling. Up until then, Jesus had been the perfectly obedient servant of God's will. But here Jesus wrestled with His own willingness to continue to follow the Father's plan and face the specter of His painful death.

In Gethsemane we see a candid, deeply human response to impending suffering. Jesus didn't want to die just then and not via crucifixion and He petitioned God to let this cup pass Him by. He is described as a man who was "sorrowful and troubled" (Matt. 26:37), "overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (Matt. 26:38), "in anguish" and producing "sweat . . . like drops of blood falling to the ground" (Luke 22:44).

If it were possible for faith itself to alter the will of God, then surely Jesus' request above all others would have been granted. Instead, Jesus wrestled with God throughout the night (the protracted nature of the struggle is highlighted in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark). And yet the legacy of Gethsemane is one of Christ's most profound gifts. In that place, Jesus demonstrated the depth of His humanity and provided a faithful paradigm for all who suffer through tribulation.

Nowhere is it suggested that Jesus persevered and went on to do the Father's will because of some supernatural grace afforded by His own divinity. Instead, Jesus grappled with intense temptation the same way we all must—in prayer. And in the end, He was blessed with the fortitude to carry out God's will. And that's a blessing we can all receive when we sincerely pray Thy will be done.

Apply the Word

The critical question for every person who prays is this: do I place at least as much, if not more, faith in the goodness of God's intentions as I do in God's ability to move mountains? Will I be equally happy to receive either response? Answering yes to this question is to possess the sort of faith that truly makes all things possible

Luke 22:47-53

TODAY IN THE WORD

Former youth worker Brad Holt tells of an object lesson he used to teach teen-agers that things aren't always what they seem.

Brad would arrive at a youth meeting with a gift box, attractively wrapped in bright paper. "Who would like a present?" he would ask.

One "lucky" youth would grab the package, excitedly rip off the paper, and find... garbage? After the laughter died down, Brad would talk about the spiritual principle behind the illustration. Something or someone may seem pleasant on the outside, but on the inside they may be dead and ugly.

Like that deceiving gift package, Judas was not what he appeared to be. And the great "thief" (John 10:10), Satan himself, looked inside Judas' heart and discovered his dark secret. Interestingly, the Bible also calls Judas a thief (John 12:6).

So Satan knew exactly where to hit Judas with temptation: his love of money. Judas was paid for his betrayal, although his "blood money" later brought him torment. The story of Jesus' betrayal is a picture of Satan gaining the upper hand in a human heart and doing his worst spiritual destruction.

Satan was so much in control of Judas and the crowd that came to arrest Jesus that Jesus called the whole scene Satan's hour (Luke 22:53). Darkness was having its way that night, especially in the heart of Judas.

And just to make sure we don't misunderstand who was behind all of this, John says that the devil prompted Judas to betray his Lord (John 13:2).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We don't like to think about Judas, because we don't want to think that we're like him in any way.

But honesty forces us to admit the truth of Jeremiah 17:9: the deceitfulness of the human heart. The answer is not to despair, but to draw even closer to the Lord and trust in His power to sustain us

Luke 22:47-23:255

They kept shouting, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" - Luke 23:21

TODAY IN THE WORD

A great-grandmother in California has donated more than 200 pints of blood. Margaret Delfino, who began giving blood in 1954, gave her 200th pint in 2009. An ovarian cancer survivor, she wishes more individuals would give, pointing out, "It can mean the difference between life and death for some people." She encourages her own family to donate, and she and a granddaughter have a date every eight weeks to do so at a local blood bank.

For many, Margaret Delfino's blood has doubtless given the gift of life. God's gift of eternal life is made possible by the blood of Christ. In today's reading, the events of Passion Week head for a climax.

To begin, Judas accomplished his act of treachery. He let the religious leaders know where they could find Jesus that night, and they showed up with a mob to arrest Him. Judas' kiss has become an idiom for betrayal by a friend, but it was unnecessary. Jesus

identified Himself, did not resist, and even undid the impetuous violence done on His behalf by Peter.

The trials Jesus endured highlight His innocence and the guilt of His accusers—both Jews and Gentiles—and the unfaithfulness of those for whom He was to die—not only religious leaders but also His disciples. As He stood trial, out in the courtyard the future “rock of the church” was denying His Lord three times, even though he had been explicitly warned he would do so that night. Thankfully, Peter’s bitter sorrow wasn’t the end of that story (see John 21:15-23).

Meanwhile, Jesus suffered torture at the hands of the Roman soldiers and two show trials. The soldiers’ mockery showed some familiarity with His ministry—they seem to relish inflicting pain on their helpless prisoner. The Jewish Sanhedrin interpreted Jesus’ few words as blasphemy. Herod hoped to get Him to put on a show, which He refused to do. And Pilate played political games, passing the buck to Herod before condemning Jesus to death in a pragmatic response to the crowd’s demands.

APPLY THE WORD

Why did Peter deny Christ three times? He was afraid. If he was identified as a friend of Jesus, perhaps they would arrest him as well. Would he then be imprisoned or executed? Peter didn’t know, and he acted on base instincts of self-preservation rather than taking a stand for what he believed. Fear is always the enemy of faith. Thankfully, when our courage fails, as it did Peter that night, there is “forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace” (Eph. 1:7).

LUKE 23

Luke 23:26-43

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. - Ephesians 4:32

TODAY IN THE WORD

“ ‘Father, forgive them!’ thus did He pray, E’en while His life-blood flowed fast away; Praying for sinners while in such woe—No one but Jesus ever loved so.” So reads one stanza of Avis B. Chistiansen’s hymn, “Blessed Redeemer.”

It’s not surprising that Jesus’ prayer of forgiveness from the cross has inspired hymns. Even people who aren’t familiar with the Bible know Jesus’ remarkable words: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (v. 34).

All four Gospels provide detailed accounts of Jesus’ trial, crucifixion, death, and resurrection. Luke, however, also records two interactions that Jesus had during His crucifixion that give us great insight into Jesus’ amazing character.

First, Jesus addressed the women who were part of the crowd following after Him. As these women mourned loudly for what was about to take place, Jesus informed them that their sorrow was misdirected. Since Jerusalem had rejected God’s Son, Jesus knew that judgment and destruction would come upon the city. The reference to a green tree (v. 31) was a reference to Jesus Himself. He wanted the crowd to consider their own fate: if this is what happens to an innocent man (the green tree also indicated innocence), then one could only imagine what would happen to a guilty person (a dry tree). In other words, Jesus was completely innocent, yet He paid the ultimate penalty before God for sin. What would happen to the truly guilty one? Jesus knew His final destination, but He wanted those who rejected Him to consider where they were headed.

Second, Luke tells us that Jesus prayed that the Father would forgive those who were crucifying Him! Jesus was in full control. John 10:18 records that Jesus said that He laid down His own life willingly. Even as they were pounding in the nails, Jesus loved His tormentors and prayed to the Father that even in their utter blindness they might receive the Father’s forgiveness.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

When Jesus prayed for His tormentors, He wasn’t overlooking their guilt. He brought them before the Father and asked that God would forgive them.

Luke 23:32-43

Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. - Luke 23:34

TODAY IN THE WORD

John Piper wrote in *Future Grace*: “No one was more grievously sinned against than Jesus. Every ounce of animosity against Him was fully undeserved. No one has ever lived who was more worthy of honor than Jesus, and no one has been dishonored more. If anyone had a right to get angry and be bitter and vengeful, it was Jesus. How did He control Himself when scoundrels, whose very lives He sustained, spit in His face? . . . Jesus had faith in the future grace of God’s righteous judgment. He did not need to avenge Himself for all the indignities He suffered, because He entrusted His cause to God. He left vengeance in God’s hands and prayed for

His enemies' repentance."

Christ overcame bitterness and vengefulness, instead showing us how to love and forgive our enemies. To stand boldly against sin (see Nov. 23–24) may have more of a cultural "cowboy appeal" to us as Americans, but we are equally responsible to take up the counter-cultural charge of loving and forgiving our enemies. To love holiness and one's enemies are both attributes of our perfect God (see Matt. 5:43–48).

To love an enemy does not mean to work ourselves into an emotional state, or to try to manufacture a warm, fuzzy feeling, but rather to act with the other's good in mind. A simple example is to pray for an enemy—in doing so, one soon finds that prayer and hatred are totally incompatible.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Are you holding a grudge against someone? Is the bitterness over what they did still strong in your feelings? Then pray for strength to do the unthinkable and forgive them (Col. 3:13). If Christ could forgive His enemies in the midst of all He was suffering, then with His help we can do the same.

Luke 23:26-56

Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. - Luke 23:34

TODAY IN THE WORD

Several years ago, a twelve-year-old boy was in the middle of his piano lesson when a stray bullet from a drunken robber's gun hit him. The shot paralyzed him. Police caught the gunman and he was tried and convicted in a court in Oakland, California. The judge sentenced him to 70 years to life in prison, seemingly a just outcome. But what came next transcended justice. The victim, Christopher Rodriguez, rolled his wheelchair to the front of the courtroom, shook the hand of the man who had shot him, and said, "I forgive you." It is uncertain whether the criminal felt true remorse, but Christopher left the court that day unburdened by hate.

Before He died, Jesus, too, forgave all those who participated in murdering Him (vv. 34-38). The Crucifixion was the turning point of history and the hinge of God's plan of redemption, but it was also an act of criminal injustice. Jesus forgave the Roman soldiers who cast lots for His clothing and mocked Him. He forgave the religious leaders who sneered at Him and challenged Him to save Himself. He forgave the gawking and passivity of the watching crowd. He forgave the followers who had run away and hidden, including the remaining disciples. His women followers did stay with Him. No doubt their presence was a comfort to Jesus. These faithful eyewitnesses throughout this heart-wrenching time also made preparations for His burial.

Jesus remained in control throughout His crucifixion (vv. 44-49). He continued the ministry of the kingdom right up to the end, forgiving the sins of one of the criminals who hung next to Him and offering him the hope of heaven. He chose the moment of His own death, signaling that it was not defeat but the surrender of His spirit to His sovereign Father. Nature responded to this momentous event with three hours of midday darkness. The inner curtain of the temple was torn in two, meaning that the terms of access to God were forever changed (see Heb. 8:11). And the commander of the execution squad cried out in faith, "Surely this was a righteous man!" (v. 47).

APPLY THE WORD

Scripture commands: "Walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph. 5:2). How can we imitate the incredible love of Christ? By loving one another. Jesus said: "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). Later the apostle John reflected: "If we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us" (1 John 4:12).

Luke 23:26-56

Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing. - Luke 23:34

TODAY IN THE WORD

The Gospel of Luke is noted for its intense emotion, revealing dialogue, and detailed character exposition. The book has the plot of a major motion picture. It's no surprise that it was written by the Bible's only Gentile author, because it carries with it much of the style of Greek culture that makes it feel so familiar to a Western audience. The crucifixion account specifically is the epitome of Luke's style and has become a central theme throughout modern art and literature.

Today's reading plunges from high-impact emotional drama to stunning, aching silence. Even as Jesus hobbled toward the place where He would be crucified, followed by mourners and weakened by vicious flogging, His thoughts were not for Himself but for

those who would suffer because of disbelief.

Everyone, it seemed, focused on Jesus' claim that He might be the Christ, the King of the Jews. The soldiers mocked Him for it. The sign above Him sarcastically announced it. Even one of the criminals ridiculed Jesus for not acting like the Messiah.

But the other criminal didn't accept the notion that Jesus was behaving badly. Amid the cloud of blasphemous insults against the Son of God, how could anyone think Jesus is the one who deserved criticism? The criminal recognized three things: 1) Jesus was innocent; 2) The criminals were guilty (a rare admission for any criminal); 3) Jesus' kingdom was still certain. His simple statement of humble faith was returned with assurance of salvation.

After three hours of suffering, an inexplicable darkness in the middle of the day, and a supernaturally torn veil, Jesus voluntarily died. The emotion and the vivid detail of the scene escape from Luke's writing at this point like a final breath. The events that followed are described in short, cold language, and the only recorded statement in the chapter after Jesus' death came from the Centurion who accurately and soberly decried the atrocity that had just taken place.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Sometimes the only appropriate response we can muster is total silence, and the crucifixion of Jesus deserves such a reaction. Reread today's passage, dwelling on its emotional events and its implications for you, then spend some time in silent reflection. There are only two kinds of people in this world: those who believe Jesus is the Christ and those who don't. Reaffirm your own belief in who He is and pray for those whose disbelief mocks His sacrifice.

Luke 23:32–43

Saved: A Bandit Awaiting Crucifixion

Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise. Luke 23:43

The 1995 movie *Dead Man Walking* recounts the true story of the relationship between convicted murderer Matthew Poncelet, who was awaiting execution on death row, and a Roman Catholic nun named Sister Helen Prejean. After his plea for a pardon was denied, Prejean served as Poncelet's spiritual counselor as he prepared for his death. Though Poncelet continued to insist upon his innocence, Sister Helen taught him that redemption was only possible if he took responsibility for his actions. Shortly before he was led to his execution, Poncelet came clean with Sister Helen and even confessed to the families of his victims.

During Jesus' final hours before death, He hung on a cross between two criminals. These two heard Him ask His Father to forgive those putting Him to death. Both heard rulers sneer at Jesus and soldiers mock Him. They watched how Jesus behaved when assaulted. One of the criminals responded by joining those hurling insults at Jesus. The other responded by confessing his own sin and seeking forgiveness. He recognized and testified to Jesus' innocence. When this one pled to Jesus for mercy, he received it.

In order to be redeemed, we must be willing and able to face the reality of our sin. Some who encountered Jesus, like the taunting criminal, hardened their hearts to God's grace which was available through Jesus Christ. Others who were given the opportunity to see themselves as they really are—like the humble criminal—confessed their need for forgiveness. Jesus' forgiveness of the criminal at His side reminds us that when we recognize our sinfulness, and acknowledge who Christ really is, we can receive the salvation Christ offers.

Apply the Word - Are you more likely to protest your innocence or to recognize the sinful state of your own heart? Coming clean—with ourselves, with others, and with God—takes courage! Pause, this week, to take an honest look at the condition of your heart with the help of God's Spirit. Confess your sin to God and accept the grace and forgiveness He offers.

Luke 23:44-49; Mark 15:33-37

Jesus said, "It is finished." With that, he bowed and gave up his spirit. - John 19:30

TODAY IN THE WORD

The South African minister Andrew Murray once wrote, "Christ's life and work, his suffering and death—it was all prayer, all dependence on God, trust in God, receiving from God, surrender to God. Thy redemption, O believer, is a redemption wrought out by prayer and intercession: thy Christ is a praying Christ." In today's study, we look at the very moment of Jesus' death and see that He lived and ended His life in prayer.

The Gospels tell us that darkness covered the land as Jesus hung on the cross. It's almost as if creation itself could barely endure this horrible sight. Yesterday we looked at Jesus' cry of agony on the cross. But as we see today, almost as soon as Jesus prayed this prayer, He seemed to answer it with another one: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

As we have said before, Jesus died willingly. He was not some victim of circumstance; He deliberately faced His death as part of His obedience to the Father. Matthew 27:50 says that Jesus “gave up his spirit.” As Pastor Ray Stedman noted, “He wasn’t put to death, he gave up his spirit; he was obedient unto death.”

Recall that John 10:18 tells us that Jesus laid down His life of His own accord. That’s why Jesus could also cry out, “It is finished” (John 19:30). He had faithfully done what the Father had asked of Him.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today marks the end of our study of the spoken prayers of Jesus recorded in the Bible. (For the next few days, we’ll look at ways Jesus modeled prayer.) Why not take some time to review these past twelve days. What has impressed you most about how Jesus prayed? Is there some aspect of His prayer life that you never noticed before? Is there some example you want to incorporate in your own prayer time? From start to finish, we have seen that our Christ is a praying Christ!

Luke 23:44–49

It’s the quintessential setting in any classic western. High noon is the time for the showdown between bad guys and good guys, the riff-raff and the sheriff. The tension of the moment is highlighted by the burning heat of the sun high in the sky, casting the shortest of shadows on the combatants, and intensifying the drama. The climax of the action coincides with the pinnacle of the sun in its arc.

It was dark at high noon as Jesus hung on the cross. The sun had stopped shining, whether it was blocked by clouds or by supernatural obstacle. There was no light for three hours as the afternoon broke. It wasn’t just confined to the hill at Golgotha, but over the whole land surrounding this pivotal moment in the history of humanity.

The curtain of the temple tearing in half was no less significant. Jesus, the sacrificial lamb who perfected the entire system of atonement, eradicated the dividing line between holy communion with God and community among mortal men. We can only imagine how the high priest would have reacted had he witnessed the veil being torn. Did he grasp that Jesus’ sacrifice reconciled men to God—meaning that the intercession of the high priest was no longer necessary?

Jesus committed His spirit into the hands of the Father, and the entire world was changed forever. What might have initially appeared like a routine Roman execution defeated the powers and the principalities of this world.

Once again we see a Gentile—a Roman centurion—observe something about Jesus that the religious leaders seemed incapable of acknowledging: Jesus was righteous. He did not deserve to die—but He did not fight it either.

Some witnesses beat their breasts in lament of His death; perhaps this crowd was different than the one that shouted for Jesus to be crucified. And those who knew Jesus, how did they react? What reaction would have been suitable? They simply watched from afar, undoubtedly in disbelief of what had just occurred.

Apply the Word

Reflect today on what Jesus gave up so that we could have eternal life. The most tragic, undeserved death in history, willfully allowed by our precious Savior. When we shouted with joy, “Hosanna!” this was the way Jesus saw fit to meet that request. It warrants more than a few moments in silence. The words thank you don’t begin to say it. As the hymn suggests, it demands our souls, our lives, our all.

LUKE 24

Luke 24

He is not here; he has risen! - Luke 24:6

TODAY IN THE WORD

Many churches commemorate Good Friday services by extinguishing candles, the only light source during evening services in which every light is turned off and every window is covered up (although we should keep in mind that the darkness of that moment happened at three in the afternoon). A traditional practice for commemorating Resurrection Sunday is to begin the service by uncovering the windows and releasing shouts of joy and praise.

Luke chooses to disrupt the silence with his record of the angelic proclamation that Jesus had risen. The women to whom this announcement was made seemed to understand the truth better than the eleven remaining apostles did. Luke resumes his detailed descriptions of personal reactions with Peter’s sprint to the tomb, which he follows up with a story that is quite simply hilarious.

It’s difficult to read the account of the disciples on the road to Emmaus without laughing out loud. Their seven-mile trek recaps the

major events of the weekend for Jesus, as if He were a stranger to the story, because they were somehow prevented from recognizing Him. Perhaps it was their doubt, because even with the news that Jesus had left the tomb, they spoke of their faith in Him in the past tense (v. 21). Even after Jesus rebuked their slowness to understand, they didn't recognize Him until after they witnessed a familiar way of breaking bread.

When Jesus appeared before the mass assembly of disciples, He gave them ample proof that He was alive, well, and completely real by showing them His hands, feet, and ability to eat.

Jesus left them with their two most critical tools for moving forward. First, He opened their minds to understand Scripture. Then, He promised the coming of the Holy Spirit, who would lead them to greater knowledge, power, and righteousness than they received while Jesus was on earth. Jesus had fulfilled His purpose, and He departed quickly. The disciples' attitude of praise as their leader ascended shows that their faith was maturing.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Keep a bookmark in Luke 24 and turn there any time you need cheering up, as it is one of the most humorous and joy-inspiring chapters in the entire Bible. In addition to the comic elements is the bedrock truth that has fueled the growth of the church for 2,000 years—Jesus Christ is risen, and He has given us all that we need to effectively serve Him. Although we are certain to face adversity, put your trust in the risen Christ!

Luke 24:1-35

Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory? - Luke 24:26

TODAY IN THE WORD

Jesus' resurrection is the central historical event of the Christian faith. Fifth-century church leader John Chrysostom said: "Let no one mourn that he has fallen again and again; for forgiveness has risen from the grave. Let no one fear death, for the death of our Savior has set us free. He has destroyed it by enduring it." Nineteenth-century preacher Charles Spurgeon added: "That very day our Lord won a victory which shook the gates of hell, and caused the universe to stand astonished. . . . On His head are many crowns, and at His feet the hosts of angels bow! Jesus is the master of legions today, while the Caesars have passed away. . . . His cause is not to be crushed, it is forever rising."

These truths were not, however, immediately clear to Jesus' followers. On that Sunday morning, the women took the lead. They went to the tomb not in hope but in respect, planning to properly anoint the corpse. But their plan went awry when the corpse turned up missing! Even then, it took a blunt angelic message for them to recall Jesus' words about being raised to life. Was it possible that He had been speaking not about a distant hope but about a literal, here-and-now reality? They reported this news to the disciples, who treated it as "nonsense" (v. 11). Only the disgraced Peter even bothered to go to the tomb and verify that the body was missing, though, puzzlingly, the graveclothes were still there.

Later that day two followers of Jesus became the first in Luke's account to talk to the risen Lord, but they failed to recognize Him. While talking to the stranger who joined them on the road to Emmaus, they gave a respectful but inadequate summary of Jesus as a powerful prophet victimized by the ruling powers, a familiar narrative in Jewish history (vv. 19-24). He responded with what must have been an amazing Bible lesson on the suffering of the Messiah (vv. 25-26). The moment of recognition finally came when they broke bread together. Hastily returning to Jerusalem, they found the Apostles already believing as a result of other appearances by Jesus.

APPLY THE WORD

The good news of the kingdom is that Jesus died and rose again. This good news means that if we call on His name and repent of our sins, we have eternal life and become children of God (John 1:12-13). Have you taken this step of faith? Just tell God you trust in His Son for salvation and accept His sacrifice for sin. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Acts 2:21). It will be the first step on an unforgettable journey!

Luke 24:13-35

Jesus, Bread, and Truth on the Road to Emmaus

In each edition of the television show *Undercover Boss*, a corporate executive assumes a fictional identity and works as an entry-level employee for a week. Then the real identity is revealed, and the boss announces rewards for some hard-working employees or other changes to benefit people throughout the company.

Our reading has a surprising revelation of true identity, but this account is much more than a feel-good story. The unrecognized

leader was, Himself, the reward His followers had been seeking.

Cleopas and his friend were walking to Emmaus just three days after the crucifixion, the same day that the empty tomb had been discovered. They were confused and upset. They told this stranger, who had joined them on the road, they had expected the mighty prophet Jesus to be the one who would redeem Israel. Now He was dead and His body was missing.

Notice that when Jesus instructed them in the teachings of Scripture, they still did not recognize Him. They were, however, eager to hear more. They urged Him to stay with them. Jesus took the bread, gave thanks, and shared it with them—a direct echo of His actions during the miraculous feeding of the five thousand men. And that was when their eyes were opened. Now they knew that this was Jesus Himself—clearly alive!— who had walked seven miles with them, teaching them the Scriptures.

As we saw in Jesus' words yesterday and will explore more tomorrow in the Lord's Supper, breaking and sharing bread is both physically and spiritually significant. This activity of breaking bread, giving thanks, and sharing with others was an identifying mark of who Jesus was (v. 35).

Apply the Word

If we are to be like Christ, we should also be known as people who break bread, give thanks, and share with others. Do we participate in fellowship with others, both in formal settings like the Lord's Supper at church as well as in other gatherings? Do we give thanks to God for His gifts? Do we share those gifts with others?

Luke 24:36-53; Matthew 28:16-20

He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. - Daniel 7:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

" 'Twas the night before Christmas when all thru the house / Not a creature was stirring not even a mouse"—so begins one of the most-loved Christmas stories. No doubt you heard this story as a child, and may plan to read it again today. On the night before Christmas, there's much talk of Saint Nicholas, or as he's commonly called, Santa Claus.

Christmas traditions are fun, but it's important to keep our focus on the real reason for our celebration, which is Jesus' birth. Perhaps even more important, Christmas also celebrates His resurrection, because if He hadn't been raised from the dead, there would be no remembrance of His birth.

As we've seen, God often uses one to reach many. What was true with Abraham and Israel is even more true of Jesus, who fulfills the promise to Abraham—that through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed. God's promise of redemption, begun in Genesis 3:15, is now revealed. Because of His death and resurrection, the forgiveness of sins is possible (Luke 24:47).

Jesus' final words to His disciples end His earthly ministry. The Great Commission, recorded in today's passages, is rightly understood to be the basis for Christian missions. But as we have seen, God's heart has been for the nations all along. What is different at this stage in redemptive history is the command to go to all the world.

In both commissioning accounts, we notice that the first response to Jesus' resurrection is worship. Next, the disciples were encouraged that they would receive power from on high (Luke 24:49), which is the Holy Spirit, and that Jesus would be with them forever (Matt. 28:20). The expression "all the nations" is important, because some suggest that the Jews have been somehow now excluded from God's plan. Yet the clause "beginning at Jerusalem" in Luke's account refutes this. Jesus commissioned His disciples to go from Jerusalem into all the world, making disciples of all peoples, whether Jew or Gentile, young or old, rich or poor.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We can consider the Great Commission as the "eve" of a whole new phase of God's redemptive plan. Just as we feel excitement and anticipation on Christmas Eve, so too we can sense the excitement that the disciples must have felt hearing Jesus' final words. Two thousand years after these words, we have even more reason for excitement. Although there are believers worldwide, we are eager to see the gospel continue to reach the nations. In our prayers and actions, let's make this our focus for this upcoming year.

Luke 24:36-45

Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! - Luke 24:39

TODAY IN THE WORD

What happened after Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried? Some people, including those who claim to be Christians, have

doubts. Consider this quote from the Reverend Steve Huber of St. Columba's Episcopal Church: "The truth of the Resurrection shouldn't be the real battleground. I think what we want to do is try and rise above that and ask, 'What is the metaphoric truth of Easter?' The real power of Easter is the transformation that, as Christians, we believe continues to happen in people's lives. If Easter is about proving the veracity of an historical event that happened 2,000 years ago, that misses the point."

Sadly, the Reverend Huber has missed the point. The Resurrection is essential to the Christian faith. This truth isn't "metaphorical," it is the physical reality of Jesus walking on the earth in a body with flesh and bones—after He had already been killed. God raised Jesus from the dead in His own physical body.

In order to have a biblical view of our bodies, we must understand the significance of the resurrection of Jesus' body. We'll explore this over the next few days. Today we want to focus on the facts presented in the Gospels regarding the Resurrection.

There was no doubt that Jesus had actually died on the cross. Those who were present saw that He breathed a final breath (Matt. 27:50; Mark 15:37; Luke 23:46-48). To make sure, the Romans pierced His side (John 19:31-35). Joseph of Arimathea was given His body for burial, and the women who followed Jesus saw His body in the tomb (Luke 23:50-55). Jesus didn't swoon, or fake His death.

Then, after His followers had witnessed beyond a doubt that their Lord had been killed, He appeared to them in recognizable form! Jesus' resurrected body is different than ours; for instance, He was able to appear and disappear (see Luke 24:30-36). But He still bore the nail scars, and He ate and drank with His disciples (v. 43). Tomorrow we'll consider more fully why the resurrection of His body is vitally important for the message of the gospel and the forgiveness of sins (v. 47).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

You may encounter people who question the reality of the Resurrection, or you may hear so-called experts attempt to debunk the historical facts of the Resurrection. If you'd like to learn more about the evidence for the truth that Jesus was physically raised from the dead, one helpful book to read is *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus* by Gary R. Habermas, available from your local Christian bookstore or from an online retailer.

Luke 24:36–53

Globalization and new technologies have created new opportunities for Christian missions, and American congregations are seizing the moment, according to scholar Robert Wuthnow in his recent book, *Boundless Faith: The Global Outreach of American Churches*. In the last decade, "12 percent of active churchgoers reported having gone overseas on a short-term mission while in their teen years," more than double the rate of the previous decade. The number of long-term and medium-term missionaries is up as well. Church giving for international evangelistic and humanitarian purposes has increased to about \$4 billion annually. Congregation-to-congregation partnerships across borders are becoming more and more common.

These efforts are motivated by a desire to obey Jesus' last words, otherwise known as the Great Commission (vv. 47–48; cf. Matt. 28:19–20). Following His Resurrection, He eventually appeared to His disciples as a group. Were they seeing a ghost or a vision? Jesus met their questions with straightforward, incontrovertible, physical proofs: They could touch His body, see and feel the nail holes in His hands and feet. He ate an ordinary piece of broiled fish. He also gave them spiritual evidence, opening their minds to understand that what had happened was exactly what was prophesied in Scripture. Doubt, amazement, and joy struggled within them—what a roller coaster ride the recent days had been!

In the days to come, they would be witnesses of these things throughout the known world. Jesus commissioned them to take the good news of the kingdom to all nations. Repentance and forgiveness of sins would be preached everywhere in His name, the name above all names, the name of the One who had suffered, died, and been raised again.

Jesus gave them and us the privilege of spreading the good news far and wide. He sent His Holy Spirit to anoint and indwell us (v. 49). Just as the disciples rejoiced in their newfound purpose, so do we trust and obey and worship, and proclaim the good news. Jesus has returned to the Father's side, but He lives in our hearts and as Head of His body, the church.

Apply the Word

Studying the life of Christ is a powerful experience. It might be worth taking some time to reflect on this month's devotional study of Luke. What have you learned about God from it? What was your favorite passage or episode? What sorts of things has the Lord been impressing on your heart and mind during this study? What issues or events would you like to explore in more depth? What changes do you need to make in your thoughts, words, and actions as a result of this study?

Luke 24:40-53

We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

TODAY IN THE WORD

The well-loved hymn, "I Know that My Redeemer Lives," contains this beautiful line: "He lives, to bless me with his love; He lives, to plead for me above; He lives, my hungry soul to feed; He lives, to help in time of need."

What a comfort to know that our Savior blesses us with His love and prays for us! Jesus' work of redemption didn't stop at His resurrection—it goes on into eternity as He continues to pour out His love through His Spirit, blessing those who trust in Him.

After Jesus was raised from the dead and before He ascended into heaven, He appeared numerous times to His disciples in His resurrected body. It must have been awesome to behold, because Luke tells us that the disciples thought they were seeing a ghost! But Jesus reassured them that it was He and proceeded to instruct them in the Scriptures (v. 45). It would seem that the disciples were then equipped with all they needed, but Jesus told them to stay in Jerusalem. His great gift of the Spirit was yet to come.

Luke then tells us that Jesus ascended as He was blessing His disciples. If we look at Acts 1, which begins the sequel to Luke's Gospel, we see this same account repeated. In fact, Acts 1:8 tells us that the disciples were instructed to wait for the Holy Spirit.

Throughout our study this month we haven't focused much on the Holy Spirit. The Gospels make it clear, however, that Jesus' life was led by the Spirit (cf. Mark 1:12). Yet the outpouring of the Holy Spirit had to wait until Jesus had been resurrected and ascended into heaven.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Have you ever wondered to whom exactly you should pray? To the Father, to Jesus, to the Holy Spirit? In truth, we're free to pray to any member of the Trinity! But Scripture teaches that we're able to have direct access to the Father because of the Son (Heb. 10:19-20), and that we pray empowered by the Holy Spirit. Today's verse from Romans shows us that the Spirit enables us to pray in our human weakness. Truly Jesus has blessed us by bringing us before the Father through the Spirit!

Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:9; Hebrews 4:14-1

TODAY IN THE WORD

Taxes are due in a month and a day! Those who have complicated financial affairs or who find government regulations difficult to understand may hire an accountant or a tax service to calculate their taxes for them.

One benefit of having an expert fill out your tax forms is that in case of an IRS audit, that person or agency will represent you before the auditor or in tax court. He will speak on your behalf, bringing his superior knowledge to bear on your side and in your defense.

That's what Christ, our great high priest, is doing right now for us. With knowledge of our situation and our humanness, He is interceding on our behalf (Heb. 4:14-16).

The truth of the Savior's ascension back into heaven and His present ministry at the Father's right hand is a priceless blessing and comfort to God's people. We began the month with Jesus' promise that He was going back to the "Father's house" to prepare a place for us. His ascension was the first step in the fulfillment of that promise.

After the dramatic moment in which Jesus was taken up into heaven while the apostles looked on, His presence and ministry dominate Scripture's references to heaven. For believers, the knowledge of Jesus' ministry in heaven is a source of encouragement and a spur to holy living. For example, as Stephen was being stoned for his witness, he saw heaven open and Jesus standing at God's right hand (Acts 7:55-56)—a profound comfort to a suffering saint.

The writer of Hebrews uses the high priestly work of Jesus in heaven as an encouragement for believers to be faithful. And Paul reminds us that we will appear before Christ in heaven to give an account of our Christian lives and to receive rewards for faithfulness (2 Cor. 5:10).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The fact that Jesus is now in heaven at His Father's right hand should make a difference in your life today.

Scripture says Jesus stands ready to intercede for you with God the Father (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:24-25). He carries you on His heart the way the Old Testament priests carried the names of Israel's tribes on their garments when they went before God.