

LUKE



Day 72

“With Certainty”

March 13 - Luke 1:1-25

Come on, can we really be certain about anything? Isn't skepticism the religion of the modern age? Isn't there a kind of intellectual pride in doubting almost everything? Don't you look educated when you can tear apart some belief that somebody else holds dear?

Skepticism implodes when it shakes hands with the Truth. The uniqueness of Bible Truth is that it is not a philosophy but a Person. It is not a set of goals or standards but a confrontation with the Man who said He was the Truth. Let me quote Jesus: “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39). Jesus said again, “I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me” (John 14:6). The real question is whether or not we can accurately establish exactly what Jesus said and did. How do we know that the New Testament documents we pick up at the local Christian bookstore are reliable or not? That's the subject of this email.

Luke was a companion of the Apostle Paul. He was not a Jew. That was a good thing for Paul because God was sending him to the Gentiles. When writing the book of Acts, Luke often uses the first person plural “we” to describe Paul's travels and his own company with him. Luke was also a doctor. Of course this too would be helpful for Paul while traveling. Nothing like having your own personal physician while away. When I went to the Holy Land in 1982 there was a doctor with us on the trip. This gave us a sense of security, knowing that if something did happen, we would be in

good hands. Maybe that was the way Paul felt too.

Luke was privy to many first-hand miracles. He was right there. Being a doctor, I'm sure it must have blown his mind when God used Paul to heal someone's affliction. Doctors are usually skeptical by nature. Their training also teaches them to weigh all of the options before they bank on one path for a cure. Is your doctor like that? Doctors also generally have superior intellectual ability, don't they? They are not gods, as some people treat them, but they are above most of us in their ability to assess problems and come up with a solution.

As a matter of fact doctors, even performed a great variety of surgeries in the Roman days when Christ and the apostles lived. Go to this web site :

<http://www.med.virginia.edu/hs-library/historical/antiqua/instru.html>

and you will find instruments that were found in Pompeii which were used by doctors in the first century. It is quite fascinating.

The introduction to Doctor Luke's gospel says a great deal about the task he took on to give us Jesus' story from the perspective of a researcher, admirer and disciple of Jesus.

“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the

things you have been taught" (Luke 1:1-4).

It's well known that Mark's gospel is one of the earliest and is dependent on the eyewitness collaboration of the Apostle Peter.

Matthew was called by Jesus early in His ministry. Matthew left his tax collector position to follow Jesus. Matthew was there when Jesus taught and preached and healed. He was used to seeing the Master do the things He did.

John is known as the Beloved disciple because of his closeness to Jesus. John was one of the first followers of Jesus. He left his family fishing business with his brother James to be with the Lord day in and day out. John is the only apostle who wasn't killed because of his belief in Jesus. Tradition says that he was boiled in oil but survived and lived to be an old man.

Luke had access to the best available eyewitnesses. Mary, the mother of Jesus — can you imagine the first-hand accounts she could talk about? I think that is why Luke gives so much detail about the birth of both John the Baptist and Jesus. His source material came from those who were there. He also would have rubbed shoulders with the early apostles. Listening to their stories and teachings must have awakened in Luke a burning passion to write out the account in an orderly way.

Of all the gospels, Luke is the toughest to read in the Greek because he uses more exclusive terminology to explain the gospel. Since he uses rarer first

century words, the novice reader has to spend quite a bit of time in a lexicon looking up definitions.

Another important thing to keep in mind is that first century folks were accustomed to oral communication to secure in their minds important information. It was not uncommon to see the prominent men of the town sitting near the gate of the city having a lively discussion about all sorts of matters. I am not saying that oral tradition was infallible. What I am saying is that first century people in general were much more perceptive about what they heard than people are today. Today we rely so much on the printed word and TV to learn what's going on, that much of the time we do not retain information because of the sheer volume of it.

Luke wrote from a position of authority. Those modern Bible critics who speak out of turn on the gospels would need to impugn Luke's stellar credentials before they make disparaging remarks about his words.

Certainty is the target for Luke and I believe he managed it with bull's-eye precision. As you read the gospel, enjoy the insights that he gives. And when you pick up your Bible this week, thank God that you can trust it beyond a shadow of a doubt.

God's blessings are sharper than a two-edged sword,

Pastor Steve



"Humility Is A Good Thing"

March 14 - Luke 1: 26-38

The prophet Isaiah spoke for God saying, "For this is what the high and lofty one says- He who lives forever, whose name is holy: 'I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to

revive the heart of the contrite'" (57:15).

On the other hand, Daniel records the pride of the heathen king this way: "Because of the high position He gave him, all the peoples and nations and men of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the

king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled. But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. He was driven away from people and given the mind of an animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like cattle; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he acknowledged that the most high God is sovereign over all the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone He wishes" (5:19-21).

I know that some of us probably see humility as weakness. God sees it as a strength.

As a matter of fact, there are many subjects of kingdom importance that at first glance appear upside down. This is the battlefield where two kingdoms collide. The kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness contain the souls of all men; there is no kingdom of gray.

The Apostle Paul said to the Colossian church: "May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (2:11-12).

The kingdom of the Son is ruled by the Man of the bloody cross. The "redemption" and "forgiveness of sins" was accomplished, not by military might or political savvy or a coup, but through humility. In Paul's letters he says in many places about Jesus that "He humbled Himself." Kingdom business might feel a bit unusual to most of us because of our background in the kingdom of darkness. Like a blind man who hasn't seen life in the same way a sighted person would; when his eyes are opened, he will still be taken aback by things he just could not fathom in his dark years. So too, when you've lived a life fueled by pride, a life where humility is now the norm will be difficult to fathom as well.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is pictured as a humble servant of the Lord. When she receives the news from the angel of her virgin pregnancy she wonders how it

will happen, but doesn't doubt that it will. She simply believes the Word of the Lord through Gabriel. This is one of the foremost attributes of humility - simple trust in the Words of God. James wrote, "Therefore, put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls" (1:21).

What is your response to the Word of God? When you hear it do you try to really hear it so that you can incorporate it into your daily life? Or, do you tend to pick and choose? "I'll take some of that and some of that, but that there, no thanks, that's too hard to digest." The discipleship process is very much about being a servant of Christ and following Christ's example and doing the things that Jesus has commanded us to do. We can get a bearing on how we are doing on that journey by asking ourselves how important the Word of God is to us. It's hard to give up our pride and follow Jesus' way, isn't it? If it isn't difficult for you, then you are in a different place than I am. Whatever we may give up to be like Jesus, we gain because "God exalts the humble." Mary has a place in history because of her humble love for God. Men, later, would come along and exalt her, but that would not have been her wish. She considered herself a servant, not a saint.

One last word about humility. GOD IS HUMBLE. God's way is to humble Himself, and He did so by sending Jesus to die on the cross. When the angel answered Mary's plea, he said that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit would be involved in the "incarnation," the "making God into flesh" miracle. At that point God changed the way He did things. Up to that point the three members of the Godhead were equal in every way, but now, through incarnation, there would be an inequality. The Son would take the role of a man, humbling Himself so that He might bear the penalty of man's sin through His sacrifice.

Every non-Christian cult that robs God of His uniqueness of One God and Three Persons, neglects to see the importance of the events here in Luke. Because Jesus humbled Himself does not mean that He was not equal to the Father or one with Him, for He continued to share oneness with Him. The Son is equal to the Father as you are equal to your father. In position, he is greater than you but in person (or, by nature) you are equal to him. Jesus was truly "Emman-

uel," or "God with us."

A further explanation of these truths can be found in Philippians 2. In the meantime, let's receive

the Word today and walk in the light of it.

God's blessings flow to those in the light,
Pastor Steve



"Celebrate Spiritual Victories"

March 15 - Luke 1: 39-56

Tell me about a time in your life when you celebrated like there was no tomorrow. What had you accomplished? What had you learned? In what ways had you grown? Did you win something with a team of players or by yourself? Who celebrated with you? Where were you? Can you remember the details of that event? I imagine the very fine lines of that time are etched in your memory forever.

No matter who wins a big game I am always emotionally struck when the winning team is celebrating in their locker room. They are usually beside themselves with joy and elation. And they usually always, to a man, praise the team even though the announcer may be congratulating them in particular. The champagne is flowing and the players are yelling and carrying on like life could never be any better. These events always bring a tear to my eye. As a matter of fact, I usually feel more emotional over a winning situation than I do in a sad situation.

I believe that it is important for all of us to celebrate our lives from time to time. If we don't, then we tend to consistently put ourselves down. We are usually way too hard on ourselves. If we'd celebrate more and grovel less I think that would be a recipe for something good. When you read through the Old Testament, you see that the nation of Israel regularly celebrated significant events in their national history. Just as we celebrate the Fourth of July in America to signify a very important time in our history, the Jews came together three times a year to celebrate the good things God had done in their history.

Imagine for a moment how Mary must have felt when the angel announced to her all that was about to happen. When she heard, she believed the promise of God. It may have seemed overwhelming, but it was undeniable. God was at work in her life, and she knew it, and she celebrated. She raises her voice in praise and begins to recount the goodness of God to her. She does not doubt. Her heart, full of faith in the promise of God, is lifted to God.

I wonder if, after having received the explanation of how things would happen, she still had a hint of mystery in her gaze and a feeling of wonder in her heart. Later on the Bible comments on her attitude by saying she hid things in her heart and pondered them. Mary was quite a woman.

Where truth meets faith there is a spiritual revolution. This was true for Mary and has held true throughout the history of Christ's church. Martin Luther is a good example of a man whose life was revolutionized when the truth of Romans Chapter 1 met a newfound faith that would change the Middle Ages. Faith is energized by the power of a promise of God. It is one thing to make changes on the outside. While those are good, they are not as influential as changes on the inside sparked by the energy of divine promises. Take a look at Peter's explanation of this topic in 2 Peter 1. He too is moved by the comprehensive value of the divine promises. As a matter of fact, Peter says that the promises cover all of human experience.

When was the last time you celebrated your faith? When was the last time, springing from gratitude, you

poured out praise to God in the presence of God for His audience alone? God's promises are to be comprehended, applied and celebrated. I can remember when my dad would say we were going to a Dodger game the next weekend. His promise met with my excitement and I was beside myself with anticipation and joy. Now I have the promises of God, promises better than those of my earthly father. They guide my life from day to day and energize me spiritually. The

Psalmist would say, "Your word, O Lord, is my delight."

I encourage you to plan a celebration. It can be alone, or you may want to include some friends. The purpose is to rejoice in the good promises of God and to let God know how elated you are that you have His Word on all matters. Remember Mary and think about all of the good things God has done in your life.

Rejoice in Jesus Always,
Pastor Steve



"Speak The Words Of God"

March 16 - Luke 1: 64-80

What is your vocabulary like? Do you enjoy words? Can you usually express in words the ideas that are in your head? Do you, like me, sometimes speak before you have fully formulated the train of thought in your mind? Then do you feel the train derailing before you can put a clamp on your lips?

It is so easy to put your foot in your mouth when your thoughts do not match your vocabulary. I find myself often saying, "What is that word?" or "how would I say that?" I guess it's okay to just follow the rule that gets abbreviated to K.I.S.S.: keep it simple, stupid. There's nothing wrong with that as long as the words coming from the mouth match the ideas you intend to communicate.

Another problem is trying to say too much about things I know very little about. Pride will push us to try to look intelligent in certain areas, when we really need to K.I.S.S. On the other hand, as we grow in our knowledge we will be able to talk about that subject more thoroughly. By the way, thoroughness is one of Luke's trademarks. This gospel gives so much detail on subjects like the ones we are reading currently. There is no doubt that Luke spent the needed time with Mary in order to verify and corroborate the

information to accurately write down the truth of the gospel.

It is always a good thing to grow in knowledge. This is especially true when it comes to expanding our knowledge about what we do for a living. Someone once said that you can become an expert on anything if you spend 15 minutes a day reading about it. Do you want to become proficient in some area? Maybe computers, or gardening, or cooking, or archery, or airplanes? The experts tell us to begin a consistent pattern of reading about that subject. Eventually, we will be so knowledgeable that we will be adept at doing it as well.

Don't you think that knowledge of the Word of God is the most important area for our lives? Wouldn't it be a good idea to purposely increase our Biblical vocabulary? We would, in a sense, be speaking God's language. Just like any area, some of the nuances of the Bible would become like second nature if we spent time getting acquainted with them. As you read through the New Testament, it would be a good idea to keep a notebook of the things that stand out to you. Or, you could write down questions that you could ask at a later time. The more we deal with the Scriptures, the friendlier we will become with them.

Zechariah, John's father, was a priest, one whose position in life depended on his familiarity with the Jewish scriptures. And yet, he doubted the Word of the Lord (Truly, I feel more akin to him than to Mary who accepted the new revelation with open arms.) The angel struck him with dumbness for his faithless response. Remember, the crowd was amazed when they saw him come out of the temple and they surmised that he had seen a vision of some sort. So Zechariah went speechless for months until he was called on to confirm the name of the little baby. After he wrote the name "John" his mouth was unloosed and he began to declare the Word of God. Luke says he spoke prophetically. He was predicting what the future held for him and his people.

Peter wrote much later: "As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace; whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies - in order in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To Him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen" (1 Peter 4: 10-11). From this verse I think we can draw both a specific application and a broader one.

When Peter says "whoever speaks," he is probably talking specifically about the gift of prophecy or the spiritual ability to speak forth the Word of God, like Zechariah today in our reading. On the other hand, it is a good idea to consider our own vocabulary when it comes to speaking the words of God. The broader application might be to practice talking about God's truth. Here are a few suggestions:

When you read your Bible keep in mind an idea that you can easily communicate with someone else. While you read, ask yourself the question: "How does this apply to me, my family, my friends, my work associates, etc.?"

Lock portions of Scripture more solidly into your thinking by going back over them and re-reading them until they become part of your vocabulary.

Read the passage of Scripture in another version of the Bible to pick up special aspects that you didn't catch the first time.

Keep a spiritual journal where you record Bible verses and thoughts that have spoken directly to you and have helped to guide you on your way.

God's blessings can become part of our vocabulary,
Pastor Steve

I wonder how many "divine appointments" we miss because we just miss them. We are too preoccupied with the droning of life. I would maintain that God is speaking to us, or trying to, but we are mostly deaf to Him. We may be doing a lot of things for God, but in the meantime our relationship with God may be suffering.

It would be like working for a company where the boss was your father. Have you ever worked for your dad? You can perform until you are blue in the face but all of that is nowhere near as important as your relationship to the boss. The greatest satisfaction would be to kick your legs up with Him at the end of the day and talk about personal stuff and things you have in common that may not involve the business of the company. If your relationship began to be defined by what you did at the business, wouldn't your real relationship suffer after a while?

Keeping appointments with our Father—spending time together with Him-- is the way we can make sure our relationship stays healthy. And in our Scripture passage for today, we are reading about one of the most important appointments God ever made with humankind.

You ladies who have had kids could probably imagine the way Mary felt at full term after traveling, probably by donkey, the 90 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. I can still remember my wife at term, up on a stepladder cleaning the windows of our house. I don't know what causes it, but right at the end some gals get this urge to work. Maybe it's a nesting instinct, an urge to get the house ready for the arrival of the little one. Well, that's very different than a long distance animal ride. Tired is probably an understatement. Exhausted, worn out, and a bit put out with the timing of this whole registration thing. I am sure they were looking for a comfortable place to lay their heads.

Have you ever been desperate to find a hotel room but kept seeing a no vacancy sign outside? You kept driving and you kept looking and you'd go into a place that looked promising and they too were full—it can be very frustrating. One vacation we tried to make another 100 miles before finding a place to camp so that we could be closer to our destination. Well, the further we went the more desolate the areas looked, and we didn't see any place to camp. We were tired and I was getting pretty cranky. It was someone else's

suggestion that we keep on looking. Finally we found a spot, a bare spot. Then when I tried to tie down the tent, the pegs broke in the hard ground. I was not a happy camper. I tried to mask my frustration but it wasn't easy. Our long day wasn't ending well. My family kept reminding me that camping was an adventure.

Think about the irony of that little slice of history in Bethlehem that day. The Son of God and His parents were homeless. No one knew they were special. No one knew that the red carpet should have been rolled out for them. They looked like any other ordinary young couple. If there was a doctor in the house, Luke doesn't mention it. I wonder if he didn't kind of wish that he had been there. I'm sure he had delivered many babies. No, Mary and Joseph were on their own. And on top of it all they couldn't find a place to get comfortable. The innkeeper did have pity on them and let them stay out in the stable. I'm sure he must have seen the somewhat panicked look on Joseph's face. Finally, they could lie down and rest. But not for long; Mary's labor had begun.

All of heaven was watching, but all of earth was oblivious. There was a long-awaited divine appointment and only the principals were there. Well, they and a few selected animals.

God's appointments continue to be made. Some may be more obvious than others, but they are happening. Here are a few suggestions to make a meeting or two with God:

Have an expectant attitude - believe that God is working in your life today and will reveal His hand to you in some way or another.

Slow down - don't get so harried with all of the day-to-day that you forget to slow down and take a God break.

Listen to others - God will speak through others, sometimes directly to you, so be listening.

Take His Words seriously - God wants to meet you in His Word and talk to you about your role in His service for the church and in the ministry He has for you in the world.

Stop believing in coincidence - God is at work in all of the details of life.

God's blessings come to those who make His appointments,

Pastor Steve



"There Was No Room"

March 17 - Luke 2: 1-20

"I'll get to that later." Have you ever heard yourself making this statement?

"I don't have any place to put it." Is your life too full?

"I'd like to get together but I'm busy." Is your schedule crowded with more filler stuff than really important stuff?

"If only I had time." Do you feel like there are not enough hours in the day?

To some degree our modern "conveniences" have made things really inconvenient. It seems like we have cluttered our lives with so many gadgets that some of the most simple things have been crowded out. Why are we so tied to our cells and our planners and GPS systems and schedules? I have talked to people in the hospital who were somewhat relieved to be there because for once life had slowed down and they could take some time to put things in perspective.

**“Your Own Soul Too”**

March 18 - Luke 2: 21-40

I don't know of anything more heart-warming than the birth of a baby. My wife used to work in the after-delivery wing of the hospital. That has always been one of her best experiences as a nurse. She was able to swaddle and cuddle and hand over a mom's most precious gift. Most of the time there was nothing but joy emanating from the rooms of those proud parents.

Just imagine how Joseph and Mary must have felt as they brought Jesus to the temple for the circumcision ceremony. They knew that He was special already, but don't you think they were probably a bit misty about what this was all about? Mary knew she had just birthed a baby without the help of a man. She knew God's angel had given them specific instruction about the events over the past months. From His name to His origin, He was a unique, one-of-a-kind son (he was God's only begotten Son). The things different about Him would not be legend formed out of secret meetings, because what He would later do and the things He stood for would be “in the sight of all people.”

How special was this child? Simeon and Anna, two well-known worshippers who were anxious to see the salvation of the Lord, both recognized the Christ. Luke makes it clear that Simeon was operating under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Maybe Luke says this because of his extraordinary insight into who Jesus was. He is an old man apparently, since he knew that he'd hang on until he had witnessed the Messiah first-hand. When he speaks you know it is from the Holy Spirit, because the odds that a Jew would say that God was going to give light to the Gentiles were pretty slim. The Jews were pretty stingy when it came to “their” Messiah.

Anna, a woman who regularly spoke for God, identified Jesus as the Messiah and began to talk to her friends about Him. Can you see the looks on the

baby's parents' faces? I wonder if they thought someone might take the baby and begin to set Him up as a baby king like the Egyptians did with boy pharaohs. Do you think it was hard for Mary and Joseph—like it is for most parents—to treat their child as a gift on loan from God? In their case, He would be a gift to all mankind.

Part of Simeon's prophecy was pointed to Mary. He said that “a sword would pierce her soul as well.” This mother and Son would share a very close bond. Don't most good mothers wish to be united in spirit to their sons? I would think so. When Jesus was pierced some 30 years later—the day of His death, the hour of His deepest need, the moment the Roman soldier finished the job by piercing His side—at that moment Mary was pierced too. She suffered in her heart when she saw the cruelty done to her son.

These are the hardest times for parents. When you see your son injured, you want to help. You cannot stop yourself. You want to be there for him. You don't want him to have to suffer alone. I have met dear people who have had their soul pierced. They could tell you what it is like to say goodbye to a beloved son. They know the agony of the loss and the bitterness of memories mixed with aloneness. They, like Mary, have suffered with their dearly loved sons.

Sometimes we forget that Jesus' story is a human story. He was an extraordinary human, but fully human nonetheless. His life involved all of the human drama that many of our lives contain. Isaiah portrays Him as experiencing the depths of despair. That little phrase in Isaiah 53, “he was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” summarizes much of His experience. It makes Him human and able to relate to us in all of our weakness. It was the weakness of the cross that made the way for absolutely helpless humans to come to an absolutely holy and perfect God. Christ's human story pulls us into heaven. He came down so

that we might go up. He died in our place so that all of the awful stuff involved in sheer separation from God will not be our future story. All praise to the grace of God!!

Mary's soul was pierced the day Jesus died and so Simeon's prophecy was, no doubt, fulfilled. There is also no doubt that Simeon was a true prophet because what he foretold did come to pass. The little baby wrapped in swaddling clothes would one day die for the sins of the world. And He would bring Jew and Gentile together under the cross of Calvary.

Is your faith a bit wobbly lately? Then I encourage

you to visualize the scene in the temple that day and draw from it strength. Christ was the chosen one from the beginning. You can trust that all of the promises that came out of His mouth will be fulfilled. Tired of this old world? It starting to get you down? Some day the Lord will return and wrap things up. In the meantime, put your trust in the Lord. He will sustain you; He will never let the righteous fall (Psalm 55:22).

God's blessings were wrapped in swaddling clothes,

Pastor Steve

**“Jesus Grew”**

March 19 - Luke 2: 41-52

I can remember being awakened in the middle of the night with horrible Charlie horses. I would leap out of my bed, holding the back of my leg as I winced in pain. It felt like my leg was stretching and pulling at the same time, as if the muscle couldn't make up its mind which way to go. Boy, did it hurt and ache!

Growing up is a difficult process for anyone. It involves changes and adjustments that are sometimes unpredictable and confusing. I think that adults often forget what it is like to be a kid growing up these days. There are so many challenges that sometimes children simply feel overwhelmed. They don't know that growing is a part of life, that they don't have any other options - everybody grows. But not everyone grows in the same direction. Some kids grow up very well adjusted, and others feel like a square peg being forced through a round hole.

Jesus faced all of the same challenges that any boy does as he meets manhood. Obviously, from our reading today we see that even at the early age of 12, He is very interested in God's point of view on things.

We see Him staying behind at the temple discussing the Word of the Lord with the teachers of the law. Jesus loved God and the things of God, like prayer and the Word of God. When you begin to grow spiritually (this is probably what Luke is referring to here as “in favor with God”) the things of God become more and more precious. Think about it. If Jesus grew in this way then how could we expect to do any less?

Let's think just for a moment about the way the boy Jesus grew.

He grew in wisdom.

As he grew up, the issues that Jesus faced progressed in intensity. The Garden of Gethsemane was a test of wisdom, where Jesus finally submitted to the will of the Father. But all along there were decisions to be made and actions to be taken. The more and greater the challenges, the greater the wisdom needed to meet them.

He grew in stature.

There is really nothing more amazing than seeing

a young man grow into adulthood. I love watching my boys grow when they are not using their new-found muscles to beat one another up.

He grew in favor with God and men.

Isn't it amazing that the sinless Son of God grew in favor with God? I see this the same way I see His baptism. He doesn't grow into greater degrees of righteousness—He is righteous. However, He grew in the Father's favor more and more as the Father watched Jesus handle the challenges in His life. In the same way, Jesus' baptism was not to forgive any sins on His part, but to fulfill "all righteousness." He was leading the way for all of us even though He did not need to be baptized for the same reason we do. For that matter, Jesus always enjoyed the fullness of the favor of God; He never lacked any amount of God's favor. But He became a man and grew as we do so, that we could follow in His footsteps and grow as well.

Peter said to us, "But grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). God intends for us to grow, to mature, to make strides in the right direction. In John 15 we are told that we will automatically grow as we remain in

Christ. And Paul says in Colossians, "Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving" (2:6). Spiritual growth is linked to our union with Christ who also grew during His years on earth.

Is there anything in your life right now that is a roadblock to growth? If so, what must you do to remove it so that you can begin to move? No one likes to remain as they are. There is something in all of us that needs watering and germination and growth. Not growing would make you a candidate for the drums.

Jesus also grew in favor with men.

Not all men, of course; He had his enemies. But those who knew Him loved Him and appreciated Him. Divine favor always outweighs man's favor, but it is good to be around people who build us up. Are you around people who affirm you? Here's a little secret that will help you to grow in this area: affirm others and it will ricochet back to you as well

God's blessings stimulate growth,
Pastor Steve



"Ramblings"

March 20 - (detour ahead)

Every now and then I reserve the right to just take a few lines to talk to you from the heart about things I see in our world that I want to highlight, hopefully for our well-being. So get yourself a cup of something, sit down and let's chat.

First, I am so proud of your progress in the New Testament. Many of you are reading through the Bible for the very first time and you need to know that there is really no other progress quite as important as this. The Bible is our anchor because it will last. It seems

like everything else in our lives either fails or ends, but the Word is solid, durable, and worth giving our lives to. Maybe you have missed a day here and there, but you are trying to stay consistent in the Word and for that I congratulate you. I am proud to be with you in the process.

Too, I hope the Word is on your mind more. Our minds are like a great big washing machine. There is so much laundry oscillating around up there that sometimes it is hard to get our bearings. The other

day my wife forgot to add detergent to the wash. We do that with our minds. So many unwashed items are swimming around that we feel clouded and unable to chart our course accurately. But once we add the Word to our system there is a cleansing effect that changes the whole way we think. Jesus said to the disciples that they were clean through the Word that He had spoken to them. There is power in the word and if we are going to make progress, we need to continue in the Word from day to day

The other day a friend asked me what the word "Bible" meant. I gave him the answer. Do you know what it means? I told him that it simply means "book" because it is from the Greek word biblios. Pretty impressive, huh? Actually, sometime back people regarded the Bible as "THE" BOOK. So Biblios would define it as the book of books, there would be no other book like it on the planet. After I answered him I remembered that someone once said that B.I.B.L.E. meant Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth. Now that's better! I like that.

Anyway you slice it, the Bible is God's method to help us think God's thoughts the way He does. Let me dial that last statement down a bit. The Bible enables us to see God's thoughts in action and enables us to see what God wants for us. It will never be wasted time to give yourself to studying and doing what the Bible says.

When you pick your Bible up today, allow it to be a lamp to your feet and a light to your path. Pick it up like a flashlight. The other night the power went off in our neighborhood. There was a loud boom and then blackness. After telling the kids not to panic we immediately went for a flashlight and candles. The flashlight brought several things. It protected us from stumbling over things in the darkness, so it was a source of security. It guided us as we made our way around the house, and outside to see what was going on in the neighborhood. The street lights were off too, so it was very dark and eerie out there. In some way it gave us hope that we were okay until the big lights went back on again.

You can easily see the parallels with the Bible.

Let me share a couple of concerns before I go. Do you know anyone right now who has isolated themselves from other believers? This trend is upsetting

to me because there is very little or no ground for it. People will make all kinds of excuses for not connecting with other believers but the truth is that 99.9% of them are selfish. We need one another. When we isolate from other believers to do life on our own, "we are not wise" Proverbs teaches. But despite this, off people go, avoiding the truth and the church in order to "find themselves" or "take a break" or "seek the Lord" or "find a church with no hypocrites." I've heard a number of excuses and each one is a smoke screen in the face of God's clear will, which is to build up the Body of Christ on an ongoing basis.

Many people are depressed today because they isolate themselves from others. They do their own thing, sometimes even saying that "I worship God my own way" or "I go out in nature and worship." That is all fine and good, but the bottom line is that we need one another for our own wellbeing and the strengthening of the church. Paul made it clear in 1 Corinthians that the church needs each and every member to function properly. As a matter of fact, he says that the member who appears to be the weakest needs the greatest applause so that we can all be built up into the fullness of Christ.

If depressed people would do three things I'd guarantee some success: 1) get into the Word; 2) connect with the church; 3) serve others. Every depressed person I have ever talked to usually lacks at least two out of these three actions. If they would seek to do all three, I believe their depression would subside.

Someone might argue that they are not motivated to do these things. I'd say, "Then start with No. 1 and see if you don't gain the motivation to do two and three." We all need to start somewhere and the Word is the place to go in order to dispel that dark cloud hanging over our lives.

Lastly, is it me or does technology hold us spell-bound? When I ask parents what their kids are in to, more and more they say video games. When I inquire if they are doing any outside activities they respond by saying that that would take them away from their games. What happened to good old-fashioned play outside. You know, the kind of play that moves the muscles and gets the blood flowing? You know, the kind of play that actually gets the kid into the game of life?

Technology is fun but it can be alluring. Let's move away from living our lives through others and experience it for ourselves. (Amen!) Let's get out and enjoy life. No excuses. No chain to the TV or the video monitor. No time for chat rooms. Let's live.

Thanks for reading.
God's blessings come to those who take my writing with a grain of salt,
Pastor Steve



"An Opportune Time"

March 21 - Luke 4: 1-13

Hasn't somebody said, "opportunity only knocks once?" I guess if that were true then we'd better be ready to go for it once it does come around. I have also heard others say things like, "it was the opportunity of a lifetime." I'm sure you've heard that too. Opportunities usually also involve some risk. The opportunity might be staring us in the face, but have to act on it in order to take advantage of the moment.

Criminals take advantage of opportunities. If you've ever been robbed then you know the sinking feeling of realizing that an evil stranger has been in your home or car. I've had crooks break into an apartment I once lived in, and I have had a stereo stolen from a car. That realization makes you feel like you have been violated.

Preventing theft involves taking some precautionary steps to divert the thief's attention away from you and your property. A big dog is always a good first line of defense. I am also told that lighting makes a difference; a cockroach can't hide when the light is on. Locking things up is important. We need to take all kinds of preemptory steps in order to be ready to thwart the criminal mind.

The Bible portrays the devil as the godfather of all criminal minds. Jesus said that he is a liar and the father of liars. He is the original "bad egg." He seeks to kill, steal and destroy. Remember Job? The devil sought to have Job's life but the Lord let him take the

temptation only so far, so that Job would learn that the Lord is ultimately in charge of all things.

Jesus comes out of His baptism experience filled and led along by the Holy Spirit of God. He was on a spiritual high. Then: temptation. That is still the pattern today. We will have spiritual highs and then wham—we are hit with temptations that we never dreamed of. Jesus meets each temptation with the ammunition of the Word. Whether it was hunger or power or honor, Jesus moved away from self-fulfillment and always ended by promoting God's glory. The devil's self-promotion tactic did not work with Jesus because He knew who He was and why He had come. He was not interested in doing the will of the devil. So often we get caught in the devil's trap because we focus on what's in the deal for us. The devil seeks to promote pride and arrogance and pull us away from the honor of God.

Even after the temptation was over and the devil retreated, the Bible says that he would be back. He would look for just the right time to zing the Lord with another temptation to disobey God. Throughout His ministry this would happen; through challenges by the Pharisees, or demon-possessed people, or even well-meaning disciples who didn't know what they were saying at the time. Every time, though, Jesus was up to the challenge and defeated all temptation. Hebrews picks up on this and says that because He was tempted He is able to help those of us who are

also tempted.

Temptation comes in many varieties and colors. The devil is a master at crafting temptation to fit you and me. He knows where we are vulnerable and will hit in that area. If we are weak to lust or pride or materialism, he will strike where it counts. He doesn't care in what area he can bring us down just as long as he does. Peter warned, "Be sober minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world. And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself restore,

confirm, strengthen, and establish you. To Him be the dominion forever and ever. Amen" (1 Peter 5: 8-11).

If you are feeling a bit overwhelmed today because of various trials in your life, then take Peter's words to heart and begin to pray with resistance against the temptations that are coming your way. Also, don't forget that, like Jesus, we too need to be full of the Holy Spirit. "Holy Spirit, fill us today with Yourself so that we might walk close to the Lord and have the power to resist temptation. In Jesus' Name. Amen."

God's blessings follow those who walk in the Spirit,
Pastor Steve



"Jesus' Credo"

March 22 - Luke 4: 14-21

"It's The Lord..."

When people tell you they are "fine" after you ask them how things are going, do you believe them? I think most people are honest when they tell you they are fine, but the reality is that most of us don't really know how we are or we choose to neglect mentioning a certain area because we don't want to deal with it presently.

I recently was talking with someone who told me that a friend had cancer, and that the weird thing about it was that by the time they had it checked out it had spread throughout their body. They had no inkling until one small bothersome thing had prompted them to go to the doctor. They were truly very sick and didn't even know it. I guess there is a lot to be said for regular check-ups.

Jesus said that the people of Noah's day were going about their daily business, carrying on like they had the day before and the day before that.

The normal routines of life were happening. Some were getting married and others were working their jobs and others were making plans for their future (in those days people had longer futures, even living hundreds of years) when all of a sudden the flood came and swept them all away. They didn't recognize that they had a problem that would result in such a cataclysmic event. Jesus said that this would also be the case when He returned.

We tend to think things are better than they actually are. "Everything is fine," we say, but the truth of the matter is that there are usually problems lurking just under the surface of things. I don't want to be too big of a fuddy-duddy, but could it be true that when we say we are fine, we are actually saying we can do life on our own and don't need anyone's help? (Unless, of course, we think we are fine because we are trusting God for His provision.) What I mean is, if I say I am not fine, I am admitting that I need help; either your

help or divine help.

Let's quote what Jesus quoted to describe His own purpose and ministry:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because He has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for
the prisoners,
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor"

When Jesus added that this was being fulfilled on that very day, the onlookers admitted that His words were genuine. But when Jesus indicated that His message was for all men and not exclusively the Jews, they took Him out to a hillside to try and throw Him over. The Bible simply records that the Lord went through their midst, kind of like the parting of the Red Sea, and proceeded on His way.

What is Jesus' credo? What is it that He stands for? What is it that He came to do? Some would say that He was a good teacher, a just man, a friend of mankind, but was that Jesus' purpose? Jesus sets the record straight by picking up the Bible and pointing to Himself from a passage in the book of Isaiah. He

would be a liberator, a healer if you will, a deliverer. He was much more than a teacher, wasn't He? He was more like a spiritual doctor who came to heal the sick. Jesus healed many who were physically sick, indeed, but He came to heal us all, all of us spiritually sick folks.

Before I heard about the love of Christ I had no idea that I needed Him. I may have had a vague sense that I needed to fulfill some religious hole in my life, but I wouldn't have been able to articulate it to anyone. I, like a good part of the population, thought I was "fine" because I wasn't as bad as some others. I was a master at self-justification. Many of my friends and family members probably would have argued my case at the judgment seat, saying I was a pretty nice guy. What they didn't know about me is what no one wants to hear: "You are full of disease and you probably do not have long to live." I was full of sin and didn't even know it until Dr. Jesus came along and showed me my true diagnosis. Fortunately, He also had the cure. His own blood could cleanse away all of the disease of sin. It alone had the right ingredients to make me clean and new and alive to God.

Jesus' Credo gives God's blessings,
Pastor Steve



"I Feel So Undeserving"

March 23 - Luke 4:38 - 5:16

Privilege brings responsibility. In high school I played golf against a guy who drove up to the course in a Porsche 914. I was a senior and he was a sophomore. Obviously he was born into privilege, probably had a silver spoon in his mouth and had whatever he needed to succeed. Truthfully, I had so much too that I really had no reason to be envious. I drove a VW and he drove a Porsche. I love VW, so really there is no problem.

This fellow was actually one of the best golfers in California. I enjoyed golfing against him because he was so consistent and would challenge you even on your own course. I tell people that my only claim to fame is that I beat John Cook at a nine-hole round of golf. In the light of the fact that John went on to be one of the PGA's best golfers, I think that is pretty cool. The truth is that if he and I played against each other 100 times, he would have beaten me 99 times.

I remember playing against him on his home course. (That outcome was a whole different story). But what I remember most is that his playing partner, who was obviously also from a privileged background, did not have the same attitude about things that John did. He made a bad putt on the last hole and was ready to wrap his putter around a tree when I caught him and said I'd take it. He gave it to me. His bad attitude got me a new putter.

My point here is that John Cook took his privilege and didn't slack off. He worked hard to accomplish the goals he had for his golf career. I used to see him on some Sunday afternoons on NBC playing in the major tournaments. He could have sat back, watched TV and become a couch potato, but he didn't. He worked and worked and competed and became great at his craft. I admire people like him because they use what is given to them for good. I don't know what happened to the other guy; you sure do not hear about him on national TV.

In our reading today Peter had been working all night to bring in a catch of fish. No luck. It was probably a bad area for a catch at that time. Jesus tells him to drop the nets, and suddenly so many fish were taken that two boats were hardly able to contain them. Look at the astonishment on Peter's face, and the others. Who is this man? That would be a question they would ask over and over in the days ahead.

Peter's response was classic emotional Simon Peter. He fell (humbled himself) and expressed the truth about how he felt right then. He felt unworthy

that he and Jesus should be in the same place. He thought if Jesus really knew how undeserving he was, then He wouldn't have given him so much. Funny, isn't it, when we receive a gift, we usually do think about whether we deserve it? It's hard to receive something if we don't think we're worthy of it.

This would be a major life lesson for Peter, the rest of Jesus' followers, and the rest of the Christian church throughout history. Jesus gives us what we do not deserve. That is the definition of grace. We cannot earn it nor do we deserve it, we can simply receive it as a gift from a Man who keeps giving even to undeserving sinners.

Today I encourage you to receive the grace of God. I wonder what God has for you today. A blessing? A lesson to be learned? A person who will love you with the love of Jesus? A financial need met out of the blue? Help in suffering? Knowledge of His grace to you through the cross? A sense of fulfillment that you have a place in His body, the church?

"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor so that you by His poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Ok, rich guy, are you going to use your riches like Cook or the guy who would throw away his putter? Let's use what we have been given to make the most out of the short time we have in this world.

God's blessings flow through grace,
Pastor Steve

**“Invite ‘Em All”**

March 24 - Luke 5: 17 - 32

A friend recently told me that he saw someone in church last weekend whom he had seen in town several years ago and had prayed for from time to time. Seeing this person in church was a boost to his faith because he saw how his prayers were answered in due time, in God’s time. As a matter of fact, I knew the whole story about this person and was able to tell my friend how he had accepted the Lord as a result of losing someone close to him. He reached out to the church and to the Lord in his time of grief.

For years now you have probably heard the analogy of grace: that it is represented by a beggar leading another beggar to the place where he had found food. We are all spiritual beggars, aren’t we? Even if at one time we thought we were something special, after meeting the Savior, we realized that we were just as needy as the next guy. If you had cancer and found the cure, would you not desire to share it with others facing the same situation?

The Jews in general did not take too kindly to tax collectors. For a strict Jew it meant that not only did they have to pay their temple tax, they had to pay Caesar his portion as well. Matthew’s fellow Jews probably looked down on him, thinking he had sold out to Rome by taking employment with the government. I have thought it ironic and even strategic that Jesus called Matthew along with Simon the Zealot. The Zealots were a group of radical Jews who defied Rome at every turn, refusing to pay their taxes and even looking for an opportunity to form insurrections against the Caesar. Jesus message of brotherhood under His Lordship would bridge the gap between these enemies.

When Jesus taught them to love their enemies I wonder if there had been an exchange between Matthew and Simon. Maybe their newfound love for the Master was bringing them together. They knew

what it meant. They knew that they would have to lay down their pride and try to get along. They knew that they would have to stop using their words to wound. Would it be worth it, for Jesus’ sake? Both of the men believed so. History records that eventually they were martyred for their commitment to Christ.

Levi, as he is called in Hebrew, Matthew in Greek, was sitting at his workplace when Jesus called him to follow. The Bible says he left it all and followed. What his previous experience with Jesus was, we don’t know; but now after apparently very little interaction, he is ready to give up his livelihood and go. Was this your experience too? When you first heard about Jesus were you intrigued to the point of intense personal interest and then were immediately ready to follow when you realized that the message of the gospel was for you? This happens to many people, while others have to think it over more. Either way is good. Jesus even encourages people to “count the cost” of following him before launching out into the unknown. Matthew, obviously, was already convinced and went.

Matthew’s response to his newfound relationship with Jesus is not unlike someone who is found by Jesus today - he throws a party where all of his friends can meet the Lord. “We have a seat for you at church on Sunday,” grandpa would say to a total stranger he had just met in line at the grocery store. Grandpa was always inviting people to come to church and hear the gospel. He wanted everyone to know. You had to think twice before sending him down to the store to pick up something you had forgotten for a meal, because he wouldn’t get back for an hour or more. He was always running into people he knew, playing practical jokes on them, and meeting new friends. These friends were always invited to church and given a pen with the address and phone number of the church on it. Grandpa was like Matthew; he wanted others to experience the same joy he enjoyed.

The Pharisees couldn’t believe that Jesus would be so lax religiously as to hang out with such riff-raff. Didn’t he realize that these people were sinners, and that they could make you unclean in some ceremonial way? Their arrogance had blinded their eyes to their own neediness. To them Jesus was a rival, someone they had to watch to make sure He didn’t lead the crowd away from their established beliefs. Maybe even someone they ought to guard against lest He draw some of their disciples to Himself.

Jesus came to call sinners, which in actuality included everyone. The Pharisees didn’t know that they needed Him. They felt that they were already righteous. It was their job, they thought, to straighten out others so that they would conform to their standard of righteousness. They had a fatal disease, the disease

of sin, but they were oblivious to it. The “sinners,” on the other hand, knew they needed Jesus because they were aware that they were spiritually sick. Jesus came to make them well. This was the reason He ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners.

Let’s follow in Matthew’s footsteps, and grandpa’s, and invite people to worship celebrations more often. It is a good way to introduce someone to the Savior.

Let’s check our own attitude toward “sinners.” Remember that all of us fit that bill. We are only beggars leading other beggars to the source of help.

Let’s pray for the church that we will have the kind of love that includes people from all backgrounds.

God desires to save people unlike us.

God’s blessings flow to sinners,
Pastor Steve

**“Is God A Spoilsport?”**

March 25 - Luke 5: 33-6:11

Our view of God is shaped from a young age. I think we pick up a great deal of our thinking about God from our parents and families. We inherit an image of the Almighty That is why some striking generational habits and ideas are passed down from one parent to the next.

This includes our traditions. It incorporates how we celebrate major holidays, Christmas and Thanksgiving for example. How do we discipline our kids; do we use corporal punishment or not? Where do we live—are we more city or country minded? How do we feel about work; were we raised with a strong or weak work ethic? And, how did we view God and choose to worship Him? Were we more or less traditional? Did we believe in the Bible, or were we skeptical of it? Did we see God as loving or harsh?

A number of religious systems, including the Pharisaic one in Jesus’ day, overemphasized the idea

of rule-keeping. These rules were the measure by which a person would gauge whether he was near or far from the God who was making a list of the things you missed. The result of this mentality was a severe form of self-righteousness based on how far up the rule-ladder you had climbed. Therefore, the Pharisees were pretty smug in their own position as the “holy ones” of Israel.

The outcome of a rule-keeping righteousness is frustration and eventually sadness. A person just cannot maintain a good enough pace in order to constantly feel right with their god. One day they feel on top of the world and the next day defeated, based on their works for the day. The biggest downfall of this way of life is the lack of any true joy about God. God becomes an unreasonable taskmaster who demands more than we can deliver and then condemns us when we don’t live up to his lofty expectations. Not

surprisingly, some religious institutions will show you the bar that you must jump over to get into their group. Then once you are in, they raise the bar so high that it is impossible to jump it. That way they can keep you trying, even if it means you are comparing yourself to others who just are trying to jump the bar as well. Misery loves company and members plod along trying to convince themselves that they are “almost there” in achieving their goals, when they know in their heart that the aim is unobtainable.

Jesus comes along doing good out of love, an entirely different motivation than the Pharisees were used to practicing. Jesus enjoyed life and was able to live freely, not bound by rules, except the rule of love. Jesus was not motivated by guilt; neither did He motivate others that way. He taught us to love God and others and that rules were meant to be broken if they interfered with good. To Jesus, people took precedence over rule—people were His priority. You are His priority. He is interested in giving you what it takes to

live life to the fullest. Would you reach out your hand today and put it in the hand of the Man who calmed the waters? Remember that song?

Is God like a loving Father to you? I hope so.

Is God interested in your wellbeing and in doing good to you? I hope you see that.

Do you sometimes feel stuck in the traditional views you inherited from previous generations? Then break out, if it will help you to love more and strive to perform less.

God is for you (Romans 8)

God holds you (John 10)

God provides for you (Psalm 23)

God protects you (Psalm 46)

God loves you (John 3)

We are friends with God through Christ (Romans 5)

Enjoy God's blessings—they're yours!!

Pastor Steve

will listen to your “poor me” whimpers. The withdrawer is high on guilt too, but plays on the loving and tender nature of a pleaser in order to make up for his own low love level.

The only true freedom for a pleaser is to learn who he is in Christ. Then he can stop living by the seat of his pants and on the whim of every emotion. He needs to give thought as to what would be best for those he is “trying” to love, rather than basing his actions on what is in it for him. As the pleaser receives more and more love from Christ and begins to learn what it means to be forgiven by Christ with no condemnation, he will be freed from the tyranny of having to please everyone.

In our reading today Jesus warns: “Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.” Like I have already said, pleasers are living a pretend life. If people really knew us, not all of them would like us. It's just not possible. When all men speak well of you it is an

indication that some of them really do not know you. Pleasers have a hard time declaring how they feel about things that are emotionally uncomfortable. So they avoid that area and busy themselves by hiding their true feelings.

Are you a pleaser, high on guilt, high on love? The goal is to become more of a Lover, low on guilt and high on love. Following Jesus' example here is absolutely essential. He forgave. Remember the cross? He loved His enemies and sometimes that meant declaring to them what was true, even if it meant He wouldn't be popular with them. Jesus was high on love and zilch on guilt. Think about that: the Lord did not have a guilty bone in His body. He was love personified. And He was not a condemner—He loved.

“For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him” (John 3: 17).

God's Blessings help us to be God-pleasers only,
Pastor Steve



Day 85

“Beware”

March 26 - Luke 6: 12-36 - Part 1 of a 2-part email today

Most of us are pleasers. Most of us would like everyone to speak well of us. Am I speaking for you today, or am I off base? Pleasers are emotionally charged and need to feel like others accept them, so they work and work at being appreciated. Pleasers have a hard time saying “no” and will drive themselves into the ground trying to please everyone in their life. Unfortunately, this kind of unrealistic attitude is sometimes met with resistance by the very people in their lives who are tired of them doing for others all of the time.

Pleasers run on high-octane guilt. They are driven to satisfy and are afraid of conflict or taking responsibility for themselves lest they fail at something and

add to their already unbearable guilt load. A pleaser pretends much of the time because he cannot face the truth of a matter and express his own negative feelings. He fears that if he did, he would be rejected by the person or persons he is trying to please. Does any of this ring a bell?

If you are a controlling type, low on guilt and low on love, then you love the pleaser type. They become your waiter. You use them to meet your needs and satisfy your goals. You are ambitious and analytical, but have very little sympathy for those pleasers in your camp who are at your beck and call.

If you're a withdrawing type you also have much use for pleasers because they are the only ones who



Day 85

“Kind To The Ungrateful And Wicked”

March 26 - Luke 6: 27-36 - Part 2 of a 2-part email today

Remember the first time you learned something that took you by surprise? Maybe your parents sat you down in grade school days and talked to you about “the birds and the bees,” and you were thinking, “Really? No way, that seems weird.” I recall seeing the Grand Canyon for the first time and thinking that it didn't look real. I was there and looking into this great crevice, but it didn't feel real for some reason.

Did you feel that type of unbelief after you read Jesus here on loving enemies? I've been a believer for quite some time and honestly I'm still trying it on for size. I know that Jesus isn't asking us to do anything that He hasn't done already, but doesn't it seem a bit

radical? It is, isn't it? True love is radical. It just so happens that God wants us to love the world like He does.

The Bible says that when we were the enemies of God, He gave His life for us. “But God demonstrated His love towards us, in that, while we were sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). We cling to that verse for ourselves, but try to apply it to your own enemies and see what happens. “Sure, I can accept God's love for me, I'm special, I'm a prize; God was lucky to get me, but the guy next door who is a pain in the neck could certainly not be in the purview of God's love, could he??” Welcome to Christianity 101. Love your enemies.

Don't retaliate: “For to this you have been called,

because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in His steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in His mouth. When He was reviled, He did not revile in return; when he suffered, He did not threaten, but continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2: 21-23).

Don't grovel: "Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called..." (1 Peter 3: 9).

Move in a positive direction toward your enemy:

"Turn to him," "Do not stop him," "Give," "Love," "Lend," "Be Merciful."

God has been kind to you. Be kind.

I will seek to apply these verses to _____ this week. God help me to love like you love. I need your strength to do this. I know that if I have your help I will succeed.

God's blessings are given to the ungrateful and wicked (Really? Yep!!),

Pastor Steve

think about the two builders today and do what Jesus says.

pray for Wilma throughout the day; do something nice for her today

I learned today that when I make plans to reach out to others, like John, that my spiritual energy revives. I honestly want to serve God's purposes and have a good heart where lots of good stuff is stored.

I am going to take on a positive attitude about my church and the men's group I have been involved in. I hope this will translate into John's life in a positive way.

"God, thanks for Wilma, she is the delight of my life. Work in her life today and help her to find peace and security with you. Help her too to get along with the people she works with and to have an influence on those who do not know you. Thank you for my kids. Lord, help all of us to show more faith in you by being willing to speak our mind more and not just sit

there and nod. In Jesus' Name, Amen."

Journals can be a great source of help in sorting out your thoughts and emotions. They can also help you think more clearly about the Bible verses you are reading. If you haven't kept a journal, try it on for size, and see if it doesn't give you a compass to find more ways to apply truth to your life.

The journey we are on requires daily guidance from the Lord, like the reminder today to forgive. We could all use a boost from day to day so that we remember who we are and what we are about. How would you apply today's reading to your day?

May the Spirit guide you as you walk with the Master.

God's blessings attend those on the journey,
Pastor Steve



"Fred's Journal of Luke 6:37-7:10 (fictitious)"

March 27 - Journaling

March 27, 2010
Lebanon, Oregon

I feel a bit lethargic this morning and don't really want to spend time in the Word and prayer but that hasn't stopped me in the past.

Wilma's sleeping in and she deserves to, since she worked late last night. I really appreciate her—she does so much. I need to pray for her.

Church yesterday was great. I am loving the worship more and more even though it is louder than I'd like it now and then. The Pastor's message reminded me of the importance of the church. Communion was special.

I would have to admit I am still a bit frustrated with the guys in my men's group since we decided to take a break from meeting. I would have rather stuck it out for a while. I think John could use the fellowship; he's such a new believer and could use the mentoring. I wish I'd speak up more and say what I really think. Too many times I just sit by and nod. I can see that my sons are pretty passive like me.

I'd like to be more energetic for spiritual things but I just don't feel it like others. Maybe I can find

something in today's reading to help me along.

Luke 6:37-7:10
forgive; give; judge self first; a good heart; practice Jesus' words; faith in Jesus.

so much in this part of the Bible.
I need to let my feelings go about the Bible study. I'm really being too critical of the guys. There are good reasons to take a break.

Maybe I could get together with John for lunch and become more acquainted with him. I hadn't thought of that before; I could try to help him grow closer to the Lord.

"Lord, use me in John's life. I'm sorry for pointing my finger at the guys, Lord. I really want to do what you say and encourage others to do the same. Help me to be like the good-hearted man who built his house on rock. I want to be like the centurion who had great faith in you."

To do:
give John a call and see if he can get together Thursday for lunch.



"Listen To The Crowd"

March 28 - Luke 7: 11-35

Crowds tend to have a mind of their own. Some crowds can be very excitable and loud. Have you ever been in such a loud crowd that you couldn't hear the person next to you? Concerts are sometimes like that. Between the crowd noise and the stage noise it is impossible to hear anything else.

Political crowds make me a bit nervous. They can be volatile. If you happen to be of a different political persuasion, you feel like a peep out of you and a lynch mob would arise. At the inauguration of the Richard Nixon library in 1990, there was a really exciting feeling in the air. A few of the people in the stands had Nixon masks and they were doing the trademark Nixon pose: arms in the air, peace signs with both hands. It was really quite comical. The crowd that day

was reverent and appreciative to be at such a historic event. I know I was grateful to be a part of it.

I was once at a baseball game in Dodger Stadium when the L.A. pitcher had a no-hitter going into the ninth inning. Even though it wasn't a large crowd that day, the electricity in the air was unmistakable. Every pitch we'd hold our breath hoping that we'd be able to see a no-hitter, a pretty rare occasion in baseball. There were two outs in the ninth. The crowd was on their feet cheering and yelling with anticipation of the next pitch. Strike one! Ball! 1-1. Ball! 2-1. The batter swung and lifted a fly ball just off the first base side of the plate. The catcher angled over and put it away for the final out. Oh, my! A no-hitter! The crowd left that day as one man. We were all celebrating and giving

high fives and hollering. We were part of it to such a degree that it felt like we were somehow doing it.

Imagine with me that you are a face in the crowd the day Jesus raised the dead boy right out of his coffin. Luke records that a large crowd followed the funeral procession. What a pathetic sight. I remember officiating at a funeral one winter out at an old graveyard in three or four inches of snow. I tried to give hope, but the setting was something out of a bleak Charles Dickens novel. I'm sure that there were a lot of sad faces that day as they carried the poor widow's only child away in a box. You can just imagine the tears and the cries and the heartache.

The NIV says that Jesus' "heart went out to her." This phrase is the translation of a single Greek word, my favorite word in the New Testament. It is a word that means something deep inside a person is roused. Somewhere deep in the bowels of a person, empathy is rushing toward the object of that feeling. "Bowels of compassion" would be one way to say it. Jesus is moved toward this funeral with a deep concern for this woman. Maybe it was the look on her face. If ever a situation defined utter hopelessness, it would be this one.

What did people think when Jesus approached? "Hey, what's this guy going to do? Hey Mister, we've got a funeral going here. The graveyard keeper is expecting us. Don't hold up the crowd." What about the kid's friends? Can you fathom how they must have felt? Grief to a child is so much more monumental that it is for an adult. Their minds were probably racing to times when they ran together and played in the river and went into town together to do errands for their parents. It wouldn't be the same without him. "He's gone, what are we going to do without him?"

Then Jesus raises him from the dead. Out of

compassion the Lord brings him back to life. The Bible says, "They were all filled with awe and praised God." That is a good description, isn't it? Jesus is awe-inspiring. How'd He do that? No one knew. All they knew was the boy was alive. He was talking. There was the familiar voice again. They all thought it was forever silenced it was back. They could enjoy and appreciate it again.

Situations that move dramatically from grief to joy can be very intense. I can see the crowd pushing in to see what had happened. Some are shaking their heads in wonder and disbelief. Some want to get close to Jesus. Some may be thinking they need to get back to their synagogue leader to verify if this man is for real or not. But what would they say, look at what He had done?

You and I are faces in the crowd today. We may not raise the dead, (that is a pretty safe assumption) but we are lights in the world. Jesus said, "Let your light so shine before men that they see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:16) Let's be lights in this dark world and shine a light on the way for others to walk more securely. We can go with the crowd, or we can point the crowd to Jesus.

Let's find ways this week to express our faith.

You don't only have to speak to someone about it. You can write about it. You can use art to express your faith. You can give people literature that honors the Lord. You can pray for others with the faith that God would work in their lives. You can invite people to church or a Christian outreach event that would touch their hearts.

Let's be lights in the world!

God's blessings shine through you,

Pastor Steve

"Forgiven Much=Love Much"

March 29 - Luke 7: 36-50

"Everybody makes mistakes." I'm sure you've heard that line and you have probably said it. What does it mean to you, though? Do you accept the fact that you have made mistakes and will again? For some of us—let's face it—it is tough to accept that we are not perfect. We would like to think that this maxim is for others.

The other night I dropped a glass in the kitchen and it shattered all over the floor. It just slipped. I could have held it with two hands but I didn't. I made a mistake. To my wife's credit she took it in stride and helped me clean up the slivers. Of course I created a hazard since it is difficult to find every piece. Dropping the glass wasn't the end of the world, but I wished I hadn't done it, it was another reminder that "everybody makes mistakes" and that I am one of the everybody.

When I was a kid I dropped one of my grandpa's special glasses. He got so angry and carried on for a while but eventually told me I was more important than his glass. I was glad he told me that but I also regretted that I had broken one of his favorite things. Life seems to consistently remind us that we are an imperfect people. Even when we try not to foul up, we do.

It is a relief when we take care of some unfinished business where we have done something wrong or caused someone else to be hurt. Depending on the nature of the offense, the weight of guilt will be more significant. If I break your pencil and you forgive me, that is nothing compared with running over your

family pet. I will be much more indebted to you if you can forgive me for causing the death of something you love.

In our reading today, the Pharisees doubt Jesus because He receives a worshiper who has a bad reputation. They thought if He were a true prophet then He would know to stay away from women like this one. Jesus addresses Simon (not Peter here; Simon was a common name in Israel, kind of like Bob in our day) by means of a parable and confrontation to make it clear that the woman is in the right and they (the Pharisees) were misjudging the situation. The idea in both is to show that those who are forgiven more will love more and they will be more grateful.

At first glance it looks like Jesus is saying that the woman needed more grace than the Pharisees because she was a really bad sinner compared to the Pharisees, who were just an inch off the mark. I'd like to propose that the woman was nearer to the kingdom of God than many of the Pharisees because she acknowledged that she needed forgiveness, whereas the Pharisees were not interested in Jesus' teaching that they needed Him. So who in reality were the greatest sinners? Not the woman!

Imagine for a moment that you were the only person on the planet. Yet you, like Adam in the Bible, have disobeyed God and fallen short of His perfect standard. You were the last guy in the world and you were separated from God. How would God save you? Would you have enough righteousness to make up for your disobedience? No way. He'd have to send His

only Son to die for you. Theoretically that sounds pretty weird, but it illustrates a very important point. Jesus would still have to bear the punishment for your sins on Himself in order for you to be saved. Therefore, what kind of a sinner are you if the solution to your problem would be the same as the solution to the prostitute's problem? You are in the same boat.

A Pharisee who was truly repentant and came to Jesus would feel the enormity of his sin once he understood the lengths Jesus went to save him. This was true in my life. I admit that at first I thought God probably got a bargain when He got me. Then as I learned what Jesus had to endure in order to make a way to heaven for me, I realized that I was no bargain at all. I, like every other sinner on the planet, was in need of grace to make it. It would be so unreasonable of me to point the finger at anyone and say I was better than him. Grace is greater than all our sins and is extended

to the sins of notorious sinners.

All of us have the potential of being in the "love much" category. The mistake we make is to think that we weren't so bad. We didn't fall into the "big sins" some of our friends were wallowing in. But if Jesus had to die for our sins then honestly we too are great sinners. Funny, isn't it, that the obvious sins blow the whistle on those who let it all hang out whereas the sins which are more covert are still as real and damaging; they are just not at the surface yet. Would you like every thought and motive of your heart to be published in tomorrow's paper? Headline: "Pastor Steve's every thought from yesterday for all to read." Now that would be interesting reading!

I have been forgiven for so much and the blood of Jesus continues to cleanse me from all sin—thankfully!

God's blessings help great sinners like us all,
Pastor Steve

book memorized, or at least referenced so that you can access different areas that apply to the operation, you'll have all you need to know to stay focused and do a good job.

You have been warned by your father and grandfather that if you try and do things on your own, you will be frustrated because you will be easily distracted from more important affairs.

If you are the independent type, it will be tough for you not to venture out on your own and try new things, even if they are not in the book. You will probably reason that there must be other ways to get things done. Armed with that kind of intention, you will have to learn the hard way. Those who don't go by the book fall into many unnecessary and undesirable traps and run into many detours.

Let's take a look at the city and try to identify a trap or roadblock or two that will get in our way. Maybe if we talk about it ahead of time there will be fair enough warning for a change of attitude.

Most young and ambitious city owners tend to stress the things that give them the most instant gratification, like luxury and stimulation (usually in the form of entertainment and indulgence). What a person in this situation doesn't realize is that he can quickly overextend himself and not have the necessary resources to maintain all aspects of the town. For instance, education and job availability may suffer. This imbalance may cause many sleepless nights trying to figure out how to smooth things out. The anxiety creates health problems both for you and the rest of your people. The stress may drive you to actions that compromise the integrity of your leadership. What you do out of panic then creates further troubles.

Because of your desperation, you may let apart-

ments and hotels in that will take in the more undesirable element. Pretty soon there are people renting space in your city who occupy your thinking day and night. They may invite more of their friends and take advantage of your allowances. Now your mind is preoccupied with traffic jams and troubled tenants, your frustration level is elevated, and you stoop to methods of operation that you would have never considered before. You become mean to your own operation. You want to throw your hands in the air and give up.

At this point you can either distract yourself by diving into those debt-ridden luxury attractions, or you could go back to the manual and begin to abide by the wisdom there.

Our worries, our riches, and our pleasures (even good and healthy ones) so preoccupy our minds that we are unable to focus on God's Word. We only have one life to manage and we live in the distraction age. There is a blinking light on every corner beckoning us away from the Manual.

We are almost a quarter of the way through the New Testament. How is your attitude right now about your reading and thinking about it? Let's do an attitude check and strengthen our resolve to be strong in the Lord and in His Word.

Dear Mayor,

Thank you for your diligence to manage your town by the Manual. We, your constituents, feel privileged to be part of your team and we are enjoying the balance we sense when you are in charge and we abide with the ways of the Manual.

Sincerely,

Your Team

God's blessings go with those who go God's way,
Pastor Steve



"They Are Choked"

March 30 - Luke 8: 1-18

Unresolved conflict chokes a relationship.
Disgruntled employees choke a business.
Egomania chokes a team effort.

A party-poopster chokes a good time.

A depressed spirit chokes the will to endure.

Impatience chokes quality work.

Fatigue chokes a good exercise program.

An undisciplined child chokes family harmony.

An old-age attitude chokes the fountain of youth.

Failure chokes the ability to risk again.

...and worries, riches, and pleasures choke God's Word.

Think about your soul—your mind and heart—as a city. What would your city look like? Would it have skyscrapers, big malls and its own airport? Or, are you more of a small town person where the A&W is the hot spot on a Friday night? Are you with me? Okay,

let's step back a minute and analyze what occupies most of our attention in order to keep our city operating efficiently.

Think about it—you are the mayor of your own city. It is your responsibility to manage the affairs of all that goes on within its borders. You decide who will be able to do business in your city, what kind of hotels and apartments can come in and what types of recreation and entertainment will be permitted. You are the final word on all matters related to what happens in your town. Congratulations! You are more important than you ever realized.

You have a manual on how to successfully run a city that has been handed down to you by your forefathers. In the manual are all of the ins and outs on how to make it work well. It is like an owner's manual for operating the city's system. Once you have the

**“Squall”**

March 31 - Luke 8: 19-39

“Expect the unexpected.”

“The only thing that is certain is that nothing is certain.”

“Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble,” (Matthew 6:34).

Jesus said the last thing. It seems like only Jesus gives reassurance.

Just when we think all is well and the world around us is at rest, in comes a monkey wrench to change our perspective. Life can be so unpredictable that a person can lose his balance just thinking about what might be. Worry warts are experts at it. Sometimes it’s hard not to join the Worry Wart Inc. Club, because we all have had times when our minds were so focused on gloom and doom that we didn’t know which way to turn.

This is probably the way the disciples felt as their little craft was rocking and rolling on the Sea of Galilee. It was a squall. It was an unexpected burst of wind, usually accompanied by rain or sleet that made it miserable to try to control the boat. In the disciples’ panic they are scurrying around in circles trying to find a way to stay alive. In the meantime, Jesus is sleeping through the ordeal in the stern. The disciples are so panicked that they believe they are going to drown. They come to Jesus with an indirect statement, “Master, Master, we are going to drown.”

Jesus bids them to trust God and not focus on the storm. He’s telling them: just have faith in God. He will sustain you.

Are you dealing this week with a sudden disturbance? Is there some commotion in your life today?

If Jesus could take care of the disciples, straight out of a sound sleep, then He can take care of you too. Put your faith in Him. Pray to Him and let Him know that you want to put your hand in His and find the strength to endure the sudden onslaught. He will see you through, don’t worry. Trust and keep trusting; He is able.

One of my favorite Proverbs reads in the English Standard Version:

“Have no fear of sudden disaster or of the ruin that overtakes the wicked. For the Lord will be your confidence and will keep your foot from being snared,” Prov. 3:25, 26.

In the old King James it says:

“Be not afraid of sudden fear...” I like that.

How can God ask us to do this? Because He’s always in the boat with us.

Let’s say, “Okay, Jesus is nearby so we can trust that things will work out in a good way. We don’t have to panic and run around in circles and act like crazy people. We can rest in His presence. He is in the boat. He has the situation well in hand. I am not going to take the control from Him but I am going to believe that He will get us safe to the other side.”

There may be unexpected things in our lives, and life may feel very uncertain at times, but what we can bank on is that Jesus is on the voyage with us. No matter how bad the squall, He will be able to help out in our time of need.

God’s blessings are certain even in unexpected times,

Pastor Steve

**“Take Nothing - The Art Of Simplicity”**

April 1 - Luke 8:40-9:9

Why does everything have to be so complicated? The manual for my cell phone looks like a college-level textbook. By the time I’ve learned one feature I’ve forgotten the one I mastered last week. I guess I don’t have an eye for detail. I like to spend as little time as possible learning something new. I think there is a hole in my learning bucket - the mind is a horrible thing to waste.

Since I’m already complaining, let me throw in my two cents on clutter. Doesn’t there seem to be too much stuff in our way? When we moved into our current house the garage became the central drop-off spot for everything so that we’d have a convenient place to distribute things to the rest of the house. You already guessed it, the garage is still cluttered. Where did we get all of that stuff? There is no place for it all, so I guess I’ll have to deposit it up in the attic. That will be a good place for it. If I can’t find something, the odds are that it will be in a pile up there.

There is something to be said for undistracted, uncluttered, and simplified living. For one thing, it aids in organization. We will actually know where stuff is and have it at our fingertips when we need it. Think about all of the time we waste looking for the thing we need at the moment. “I know it’s around here somewhere,” we mutter to ourselves. And how many times have you gone out to the store to buy something that appeared a few days later as you were rummaging through a drawer? Too much stuff also forces us to focus on the maintenance and upkeep of all the items in our “need to have” pile. We are preoccupied with making sure this or that is running or up to date or not out of batteries.

When Jesus sent the disciples out to share the message of the Kingdom, He told them to go light. As a matter of fact, He told them to “take nothing for the journey.” They were going to be completely depen-

dent on God to meet all of their needs. Now that is a frightening place and an exciting place at the same time. Think about all of the stories they’d have about God meeting their needs. It would also allow others to be gracious to them and open their homes to the weary missionaries.

Jesus was teaching them that God would provide. Think back to the Sermon on the Mount for a moment. Remember all of the remarks in that message about not being anxious about your life? Instead, Jesus said for us to put kingdom matters first, and then we would see that, miraculously, all of our basic needs would be met. Paul picked up this same teaching in his ministry when he told the church at Philippi that “God would meet all of their needs according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” God provides.

Why is it that a complicated, cluttered life makes it hard to live a life of faith? Simply put, it distracts us from simplicity and a focused devotion to the Lord. When our minds are cluttered with the cares of life we will find it hard to see our own mission in the world.

I wonder if any of the apostles were a bit taken aback when Jesus asked them to just go and not worry about their bare essentials. I’m sure there was a finicky Boy Scout type in the group who was all excited when he heard that they were going out on a mission. But how did he feel when he was told to leave all his gear at home? It seems like trusting Jesus is never cut and dried, easy and without challenge. Jesus constantly pushes us forward into greater and greater challenges when it comes to our faith in God.

Application:

Throw out 17 objects around you that are in your way.

Make a list of time wasters in your life and systematically begin to eliminate them from your life. For example, take an account of how much time you spend watching the tube and then cut back signifi-

cantly. Or, take note of the unnecessary time you spend chit chatting on the phone; cut back, and use that time to eliminate clutter around you.

Have a garage sale and get rid of the excess stuff. Use the money to support some form of world mission.

If you have two of the same thing, give it away to someone else.

Eliminate some busy work like washing your car three times a week, and spend that time praying instead.

If you have little already, give thanks. You are in a

much better position than the person who has much. If you have much, begin to change your attitude about the necessity of having much. Pare down so that your life is not so complicated. If you could really care less about material things then why do you have so many of them?

Do something today to simplify your life so you can concentrate on the things that matter. It matters to God, because you matter to God.

God's blessings are more recognizable through the eyes of simplicity,

Pastor Steve



“Only”

April 2 - Luke 9: 10-27

Goodness Comes From God, “God has resources that we know nothing about.” A pastor once said that and I have never forgotten it.

That doesn't mean I have always applied it to my life. I, like most, naturally look to my own resources when I am in a pinch.

That same pastor also said hypothetically, “What would you think if someone wrote you a check for \$5,000.00?” You'd probably jump up and down for joy. But a check is only a promise to pay. It's a “guarantee” that the payer will actually have the funds in the bank to cover the check. Have you ever gotten a bad check?

You, on the other hand, have God's promise. He said that He would meet all of your needs through Jesus Christ. “God has resources that we know nothing about.”

We get in a fix and then begin to think through what all of our options are in order to solve the problem. Usually, worry is one of the methods to deal with the issue. And so we think about all of the possibilities to find a resolution and we pick one or two and begin

to work as hard as we can to solve the dilemma. This can lead to more consternation and stress.

The day Jesus fed the 5,000 with a little bit of food, the disciples approached the problem like most would. They said that they only had five loaves of bread and a few fish. That wouldn't even cover appetizers. But the Lord had said for them to feed the crowd, so they quickly sized up their resources...and eyed the crowd...and then they probably took another look at the crowd...and then there were probably 12 quizzical looks in Jesus' direction. What we have and what's needed are not in harmony. We have a problem.

Jesus, so the account goes, showed them that God has resources that they knew nothing about. Can you imagine the looks on their faces when the food began to multiply? And then to have 12 baskets full of leftovers to carry away must have blown their minds. Just think, one basket per apostle. Now that must have been a sight!

Are you between a rock and a hard place? Is there a detour sign right in front of you, and you have

no idea where that route will take you? Do you have questions but no answers? Remember, God has resources that you know nothing about. Do you want to accomplish something for God but feel too weak to do it? Are you frustrated with your own failings and feel unworthy of God's help?

Would you be willing to simply pray and ask the Lord what He can do in your circumstances? “Lord, I'm out of options, I need you to step in and provide in your own ways.” I think this is where that verse in Proverbs 3 reminds us to not lean on our own understanding. “Father, would you provide? I'm too tired and stressed out. I need you to light my way and give me wisdom and strength to deal with my life right now. Lord, I'm relying on you now because all I have is some bread and fish and there's a crowd out there.”

Suggestions:

Give yourself a “worry free” pass for one full day. I will wait to worry 24 hours from now. In the meantime, I will commit my worries to God.

Stake your claim to God's resources by reading

the Word in place of worry. You will find a perfect peace if you do this.

Write your worries out on a 3x5 card, hold it up to God and pray that He would meet your needs. Tuck the card into Philippians 4 in your Bible.

Do what Jesus tells you. If you feel like He's telling you to use what you have and go for it, then go right ahead and see if He doesn't multiply what you have right before your very eyes.

Tell people that you are trusting God to meet your needs and that you are not sure how He will do it, but that isn't important because you know He can. Don't be presumptuous; you may think your needs are one thing when they are really another. Remember, the food was multiplied to meet the needs of others, not the disciples. So be others-minded. It's in helping others that God provides for our needs.

God's blessings go to those in need—He will provide,

Pastor Steve



“He Is Not With Us”

April 3 - Luke 9: 28-56

Were you in the “in crowd” in school? If not, did that bother you? Some kids feel an overwhelming sense of isolation from others because they are not included in a popular group of one sort or another. I've always thought parents should direct their kids from an early age into different pursuits they could excel at, so their kids could make friends with birds of the same feather.

Not all kids are going to be into sports. It is foolish for a parent to force their child to do something that they were good at in school if the kid is not interested. God has made each of us to be good at something. How do you think someone feels when their parent or

a friend invalidates a pursuit that they are interested in? We need to encourage kids to explore different areas until they find a passion for something, and then encourage them to go for it with all their might. If it happens to be something that isn't our own cup of tea, so be it—that is not the most important thing.

John, the apostle of love, brings a concern to Jesus in our reading today. It is a concern that is still on the mind of many church groups today. We are suspicious about whether God could use someone from a group different than our own. We tend (I think it's human nature) to see our group as the “in group.” And, of course, John had Jesus right there, so it would have

been natural to think that an outsider who was using the Lord's name may pose a problem in the PR category. What if he didn't do things like they did?

This is also a problem when it comes to including others in whatever church ministry we are connected with. Sometimes we set ourselves up to exclude new folks who might be interested in what we have going if they don't happen to fit the mold we have made. If someone comes into the assembly and is distinctly different than the rest, he will stand out like a sore thumb. But just because he is different, does that mean we should not extend an attitude of graciousness to him? James has some direct words that address this subject. Basically, he says that we should not show partiality to some—especially the rich—just because they might be able to benefit the fellowship in a monetary way. So James says that we are not to prefer the rich to the poor.

Jesus told John to let him go ahead and cast out the demon in His name, because the person who is not against us is really for us. He needs to be acknowledged even though he may not be right where we are.

Later on, when the Apostle Paul addresses the Corinthian church he has to rebuke them for their party-line spirit. They were following different leaders, all exuding the attitude that their group was the "in group." Paul said that those who did that were only demonstrating themselves to be immature believers. Maturity brings with it an inclusion of believers who were distinctly different.

This lesson would be handy when the band of brothers made their way through Samaria, a people group who were generally hated by the Jews, because

of the intermarriage of Jews with non-Jews. When the Samaritans would not welcome the band, James and John are ready to call down fire from the skies. Jesus rebuked them. Jesus had come into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world would be saved through Him. That includes the Samaritans. John would eventually learn the lesson and go on to be the epitome of a person who lived a life of love. As a matter of fact, when the post-resurrection and ascension period began, the gospel did make its way to Samaria. And when the people received Jesus, Peter and John went down there to pray for the them so that they would receive the Holy Spirit.

Are you glad when people different from you, maybe more emotional or less educated or more demonstrative, are involved in the gospel ministry? Or do you wish they'd do it like you do? Is your way the only right way to do things?

It's important to remember that we are talking about believers who hold to the same essential teachings of the New Testament that were handed down to us: the Trinity, the deity of Christ, salvation by faith in the cross, a real heaven and real hell, a future resurrection of the body. These are essentials that define the lines of acceptable Biblical thinking. But the way someone expresses those essentials can be as diverse as the people involved. God made us all different so that we can reach different people. Let's not exclude others just because they are different from us.

God's blessings rain on those who love all believers,

Pastor Steve



"Just Ask... Then Go"

April 4 - Luke 10: 2-3

Grace Is God's Gift,
Let me jostle your mind and heart a bit today.

You have a spiritual story (if you have received Jesus) that others would benefit from.

God has a story that people you know would benefit from.

Jesus said to His workers: "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Go!..." (Luke 10:2-3a).

How do you feel about your story? Most people feel like their story is not spectacular enough to be told. They have a lack of confidence when it comes to sharing what difference Christ has made in their lives. "Maybe they'd listen to someone else, but I don't think they would be interested in my life," you say.

So tell me, what difference has Christ made in your life?

Has He given you purpose?

Has the Bible become more real to you?

Do you have some assurance that God loves you?

Do you now believe God has a plan for your life?

Is the feeling of emptiness or insecurity or isolation a memory?

Do you now have Christian friends that you can really count on?

Do you worry less?

Do you find an ongoing peace when you pray about your issues?

Have you been able to forgive others more freely since coming to Christ?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, then you have a significant story to tell. It doesn't matter if you have been a Christian since you were a child or if you recently made that confession; God can use you right where you are.

Another important aspect to think about is God's

story. It is important that you have a handle on why Jesus came; the cross and the resurrection. Faith in Jesus is the means by which a person is made right with God. When the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of non-believers and brings them to life, they embrace Jesus and He becomes their God.

When Jesus talked about reaching out to others, He put it in fishing terms. He said from now on you would be a fisher of men. And the best place to start fishing is in your own pond. Are there family members, business associates, social acquaintances, or sports team members with whom you could share your story and God's story? Take a moment to list the names of people in your sphere of influence whom you could attempt to fish for.

The next step is to pray for the people on your list. Look back at the verses about the harvest. Notice that Jesus says to pray that someone would go to those who need to be harvested. These are the people who have not yet surrendered their lives to Christ. They are separated from God because of their sin and they need Christ's forgiveness in order to be forgiven and have eternal life.

The Good News of the message of the cross and resurrection is exciting and interesting and really unbelievable. God went to such great lengths to save us poor sinners. Paul writes in Philippians that Christ died "even the death of the cross," to emphasize the extreme nature of His sacrifice. It wasn't any old kind of death—beheading, drowning, a push over a wall. It was a shameful and agonizing death on a Roman cross. It was humiliating. God loved us that much!

But if you are like me, sometimes the Good News of yesterday is the old news of today. So how do we keep the news fresh in our minds and hearts?

1. When you pray daily, think about the death and resurrection.

2. Look for opportunities to share. The more you

talk about it, the fresher it stays.

3. Read sections in the Bible on the death and resurrection, especially the book of Romans.

4. Pick up on the Apostle Paul's attitude about the gospel. He is contagious.

5. Find a buddy who has an interest in reaching others and feed off of his enthusiasm. You will inspire him too.

Remember to Rejoice in Jesus Always.

God's blessings are good news,
Pastor Steve



“Worried and Upset About Many Things”

April 5 - Luke 10: 25 - 11: 4

What are you concerned about today? What has your head spinning? What is keeping you up at night? Who is renting unwelcome space in your head?

It doesn't take much for life to feel like it is spinning out of control. Things can be going just great between my wife and me, and then an issue arises and I feel like the world is coming to an end. I hate that feeling.

Maybe Peter felt like that when he stepped out on to the waves to come to Jesus. For a moment life was going great, and he must have felt invincible. But as soon as he realized where he was and how the waves were breaking, he took his eyes off of Jesus and began to sink. Have you ever had that sinking feeling? Jesus lifted Peter from the sea and into the safety of the boat. Jesus rescued him when he needed saving. I think all of us can relate to that. We are more like Peter than we'd like to admit. Peter was compulsive, overly self-confident, and outspoken. Peter was human, and the events before the cross would highlight that truth.

Allow me to ask you a couple of personal questions. What percentage of your worries are on things you have no control over? On what percentage do you have some say in the outcome? What percentage has paralyzed you because you simply do not want to face them? What percentage are created because you

are consumed with blaming others? What percentage are caused by your need for others' approval? What percentage are the result of guilt?

Ouch!

Jesus was friends with a trio of siblings: Mary, Martha and Lazarus. How that relationship began is unclear, but the fact that they were close is no secret. Whenever Jesus was in Jerusalem, which was quite a bit, he would often stay with them. Bethany was two miles outside of Jerusalem. I'm sure supper was often on in the evening waiting for the dusty disciples.

At one such time, Martha is very distracted by the need to make everyone feel welcomed and well fed. She is so consumed with it that she even complains to Jesus that He should tell her sister to get it in gear and help with the preparations rather than sit at His feet and listen to Him teach. Jesus' response to Martha is relevant for all time. I think we can identify with Martha more than Mary for the most part. What do you think? When guests show up at your house, do you say things like, "This place is such a mess, I've been unable to pick things up today. Johnny had his friends over and boy, do they make things a pigsty." Or, "Pardon the mess." Or, "I'm so sorry for the mess, I've just been so busy lately."

Jesus' words to Martha must have pierced her soul. "You are too preoccupied. Mary is doing the necessary thing. She is doing the thing that will last."

Let's not be too quick to say that Jesus is against us doing serving work. He said that those who serve will be the greatest in the Kingdom of God. Don't you think it was her attitude that enlisted the Lord's response? She seemed to say, "Look at Mary, always getting off the hook, never doing the Lord's work—I'm stressed here, don't she and Jesus understand that? Maybe she could get off of her seat and HELP!"

Attitude, attitude, attitude. It's the way we say it that really identifies where our heart is.

In the process of this conversation I think Jesus has hit on something that we modern day Americans can learn from. We are good at staying busy and/or looking busy. I think this often translates into our walk with God. Time with God is part of our busy schedule and is often interrupted by busy work. When I think about the number of modern day conveniences/distractions, I see that it is no wonder there is so much stress in our society. Plus, God's voice is often muted by the noise around us. Once I was in an airport in Minneapolis, MN., trying to read when a cacophony of noise was, all of a sudden, all around me. The news guy came on, then there was the announcer over the

intercom giving flight schedules, and then a mom with her kids landed right next to me. Help! I finally had to get up and move to a vacant terminal for a bit of a break.

It is no wonder people will often greet one another with the comment, "How are things going, been busy lately?" Why do we say that? Because busyness is the name of the game. For some reason, if we stay busy, we feel like we're ok. And Jesus was saying to Martha, Mary is doing the needed thing that will prepare her for doing God's will. Martha, relax. Take a break. You'll be able to get to dinner. Sit down and let me refresh your soul.

Please take some time out today to refresh your soul, would you? Take some extra time with your Bible and relax and enjoy the presence of God. God will meet you there and will not scold you if the dishes aren't done or the wash is half done or the trash needs to be taken out.

God's blessings descend on those who sit still at Jesus' feet,
Pastor Steve



“Happy In Jesus”

April 6 - Luke 11: 5-32

I think most of us get too caught up in observing life rather than living it. We will sometimes live our lives vicariously through our heroes or our books, or our favorite movie actors. From time to time though, I suddenly realize that my life counts and that what I do or say will actually have an impact.

Remember when your history teacher tried to explain why the past was so important in understanding the present? He is the teacher who gets put on the spot more than any other, because some wiseacre student will make the comment that studying about dead guys doesn't have anything to do with our lives today. The truth is, most students do not see how

they fit into the here and now. All of us, to one degree or another, are grasping for meaning during our short stay here.

Our lives do matter though, very much. We matter to God, we matter to others, we matter in the church (if we are believers), and we matter to future generations (if we have kids). Remember the heart-warming movie "It's a Wonderful Life," about a man who wishes that he never lived? He is granted his wish, and then learns about how different life would have been for a variety of people if he hadn't lived.

Our lives matter. Your life matters today no matter how old you are or what kind of health you are

in, no matter what your educational background is or what skills you possess—you matter!

As Jesus is teaching about the kingdom of God and illuminating the people about the limitations of the devil, someone in the crowd, a woman, got sentimental and announced that Jesus' mother must be very blessed to have a Son like Him. Jesus said that real blessedness came not by blood but to those who heard the word of God and acted on it. In every occurrence where Mary is venerated, the Lord quickly puts her in her place by putting the focus back on God.

In this statement, Jesus is telling us to get into the game of life by taking God's Word to heart and practicing it. I admire those athletes who worked their tails off and yet hardly ever got in the game. They were at every practice. They were encouraging to the other players even though they did not receive the same adulation. They worked the starters hard in practice so that they could shine during the game. It is tough to be a benchwarmer when you want so desperately to play. But their time would come. One day they'd hear their name and then they'd jump up and squat at the scorer's table before the buzzer that marked their entrance. Then all of the hard work would be worth it. They would be contributing on the court and giving it their all, just as they had always given their all before.

The Bible emphasizes that readiness to serve God is so important. In other words, are you available? Do you sometimes get discouraged that others appear to be used more often than you? Are you tired of waiting

and get tempted to let your guard down and let time in the Word slip because you do not see your part in the puzzle? God will use you if you are willing to serve Him. Jesus made that clear.

Unlike the athlete illustration, being a child of God is no game. God has a place for you in His church. If you are a member of the Body of Christ then you have a place. Maybe you haven't discovered it fully yet, but you will, because God will call your name. Then you will be ready because you have been hearing the Word and longing for new ways to put it into practice.

Paul said that our lives are like God's poem. He is writing your story each and every day and will weave a beautiful sonnet out of your life. You are God's workmanship, created for good works that God has prepared ahead of time that you should do (Ephesians 2: 10).

We'll be happy in Jesus if we sit at His feet and hear the Word with an expectant attitude that we will be "up and at 'em" and headed out to be doers of what we have learned.

Who can we serve? Who can we speak encouraging words to? How can we build the church today? If others tear the church down, how can we show them that the church is God's Body and we all need to build it up? With whom can we share the Gospel and demonstrate God's love today?

Up and at 'em! Let's go and do what we learn.

God's Blessings come to those who hear and do,
Pastor Steve

but more often than not we stay indoors and hibernate like a bunch of moles. Think of all that grows because of light! We know that light has a profound impact on the way plants grow, but we usually take for granted the awesome power of photosynthesis.

Jesus calls us to become fully immersed in Him, like a baptism. After having been dunked completely under water, Jesus continues to bid us come and be wholly given to Him and His purposes for our life. Discipleship is a lifelong process of complete surrender to the Master. Funny thing is, just when I think I have it wired and I sense that I am on the road to total submission to Christ, up pops another challenge that drives me to obedience. If I pass the test and give up what I am holding too tightly, then there is a feeling of fulfillment and the sense that I am edging forward in my walk with Him. If I refuse to heed the challenge then it's back to the drawing board and He begins to work with me in other ways. The goal is the same for all of us. God wants us to conform to the image of His Son. He was the first fruit of a life totally submitted to God and we are following after, that we too might bear fruit and walk as Jesus walked.

In what ways is the eye the lamp of the body? We process most of our life through the eye, don't we? What we see, what we take in through the portal of the eye is transferred to the mind. It takes root there and eventually becomes a part of us. It's kind of like what we see is what we get. What is pleasing to the eye will eventually make its way into the steps we take.

If you view the world from God's perspective you will think about things much differently than if you see the world as a random cosmic accident ruled by the survival of the fittest. If your eye is on God's works you will be a very thankful person who uses what the Lord has given to us for His glorification.

If you view the world from God's perspective you will see other people as made in the image of God. You will be inclined to love people rather than use them for your purposes. You will make Jesus the Leader of your life because you will see the way He treated people and will feel inclined to follow in His steps.

If you view the world from God's perspective you will operate from His viewpoint. The more degrees of

that view you take in, the greater the amount of light you will have with which to see your way ahead. He will light your way and keep you in His way and in His Word; He will guide you because you are living for Him.

But if the eye is bad, the darkness overshadows the light and it is difficult to see your way. The eye can take in what is bad and dwell there. When this happens the darkness will eventually take over. We naturally slip into the darkness when we are not choosing to walk in the light. We default to letting all kinds of bad things catch our eye. We may know they are wrong but they hit a nerve and carry us away into thought and actions that later we feel guilty over.

Paul talked about this in Ephesians chapter four:

"Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, 'Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.' Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise."

Christ has a dramatic impact on the way we see physical things, yes, but more importantly the way we see those things and incorporate or reject them from our minds and hearts. Jesus wants us to be "completely lighted." So we must be serious about taking all of our lives into the light and talking to God about the whole of it. He knows about it all anyway, so what is there to lose? "But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin...if we confess (agree with God about) our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1). In that same chapter in John he says that "God is light." He is perfect and He will shine His light on us and purify us from the darkness.

Lord, let your light shine in me. I want to be a lamp for you. Forgive my darkness and replace it with the beam of your bright light. I believe you can do great things in and through me.

God's blessings are in the Light,
Pastor Steve



"Walk In Light"

April 7 - Luke 11: 33-54

We all see light and walk in light every day. Since I live in Oregon some of my friends would challenge that fact, but that is beside the point. Even though we all have light, so often we

walk as if we had no clue what a gift light is.

Think of a few of the ways we are negligent with the light we have. We have opportunities to go out in the sunshine and take a stroll to refresh ourselves,

**“Greed”**

April 8 - Luke 12: 1-34

We live in a material world. We get a certain amount of satisfaction from building our world just the way we want it. We erect our castles and we feel secure and we think we are doing something constructive. We applaud ourselves and begin to concoct our next project in order to enhance or build on what we already have. Voila! We have arrived!

The Christian counselor Larry Crabb points to the cursed man Cain who was banished from the presence of the Lord and then went into to his own land and built a city. Crabb says that we build cities to find our own bit of heaven on earth. We would like to think that we are doing something for others, but the truth is that we are building for ourselves, maybe in order to justify our existence. The problem is that man builds and leaves his wealth to another, who often just squanders what was given. So the security we originally sought is swallowed up in the abyss of another greedy generation.

The first generation of the 21st century is a greedy bunch. We tend to want it all, and we want it now. Do you know what is the number one reason students drop out of college? Credit issues. We use our debit and credit cards like they have an unlimited supply. Isn't it amazing how using a credit card gives you the feeling like you are not really spending money? If I hand the guy at the gas station my credit card it feels harmless, but if I hand him a \$20 bill it's painful. We want more for less, and we desire the happiness a new toy will afford us today. Why wait when it can be yours right now?

Jesus said that we needed to “be on guard against all kinds of greed.” Greed is tenacious, isn't it? It works its way into our thought process and before you know it, we just have to have that thing that looks so shiny and alluring.

Greed's twin sister is idolatry. It is the false notion

that something will be able to satisfy the longing in each of us for God. We make things our god and worship at the altar of dissatisfaction. I remember as a kid staying up at night thinking about getting a hamster. I would visualize what it would look like and how it would be in a certain cage and what I would name it (I thought Starfire sounded like a really cool name), and I thought of how happy it would make me because I could play with it and make it a new friend. You know what, I did get Starfire, but eventually I got tired of the dirty rodent and lost interest in the mystique of the creature. Such is life; we get the very thing we long for and find out that we are not as far along with it than we thought we would be.

Assets give us the false illusion that we are secure and happy. The more we have, the more we can surmise that we don't need God. Remember the Tower of Babel? Those people were building a skyscraper in the name of humanity's ability to rule itself. The result was an independence from God that met with divine reckoning and the division of peoples. Any attempt to be like little gods, which is the way we sometimes feel when we have built something really fascinating or have solved some major problem, is a recipe for disaster. We will never be able to keep up with God. Instead, we rob God of His rightful glory as the Creator of all things.

The rich man in our text today exemplifies the person who leans on his wealth for security. Little did he know that his soul would be brought into judgment right when he thought he had it made. He did not consider God, but built his own city. He sought security in himself and not in the God who had created him, giving him abilities that he should have used to serve his Creator. This man is on a quest of self-aggrandizement in the hope that he will achieve immortality in the eyes of his peers. But the praise of men is fleeting in the scope of eternity, and riches grow wings and fly

away.

In contrast to the rich man is the person who humbly trusts God for his daily bread. He doesn't need to worry about where his next meal is coming from or what kind of clothes he will be wearing. He sees that God takes care of the animal kingdom and he can trust that the same God will also take care of him. He seeks to do God's will and is interested in the development of God's kingdom on earth, not his own. He is satisfied with God's rule and believes that he can trust God all the days of his life.

Does greed have hold of you in some way? If so, are you willing to admit it and talk to someone about

it? The first step to making your way out of it is to get it off your shoulders by admitting it to someone you trust.

Next you must simplify your spending. Make credit a thing of the past by paying off high-interest credit cards. Cut them up. Don't let them control you. You control them.

Then, begin to invest in God's things. The work of the church, missions, helping ministries, etc.

After that, find ways to give rather than receive.

God's blessings are in the giving more than the receiving,

Pastor Steve

**“Degrees of Judgment”**

April 9 - Luke 12: 35-59

God Reigns,

Have you ever had to go to court? It can be very intimidating. The judge is up there in his long dark robe. There are people with badges and a court reporter typing in everything that's said. Then there are the attorneys in their three-piece suits, all with that stare they must learn in school. I've been a few times and it always feels ominous.

I was once on a jury for a petty theft crime. The man was on trial for stealing \$50. During the jury selection phase one potential juror argued that he thought it was dumb to try a man and spend all the money for a measly fifty bucks. The attorney quickly rebuked him and gave him a five minute lecture on the importance of the justice system. He was dismissed.

By the way, we sent the thief up the river.

Under our current judicial system it is sometimes hard to understand certain decisions. How can a DUI offender get off so easily? Especially if it isn't his first offense. How come that thief got off the hook when

we all know he will go out and do it again? Once my dad caught a thief in his home. As my dad waved a gun over the man's head the police arrived and hauled the man to jail. Before my dad could come to court to testify against him, he was out. Why? Overcrowding in the jail system.

What if you went into court for a jaywalking offense and the judge pronounced a life sentence because you walked against traffic? You'd be flabbergasted. We don't expect decisions like that. We do expect the punishment to fit the crime.

This is true in raising kids as well. If you ground your child for two weeks because he spilt the milk at the dinner table, the chances are that sooner or later the kid will rebel. We have a built-in sense of right and wrong and when we are treated unfairly we naturally get angry. The frustration gives way to rebellious anger. “If I'm not going to be treated fairly then the heck with the system, I'm going to do my own thing.”

Some people have the mistaken idea that God's judgment will be arbitrary. That is, God will give



everyone the same punishment no matter what they have done. In other words, there will be no degrees of punishment, but each will be lumped in with all the rest. The rationale for this thinking is that all sinners go to hell. If you die without God's forgiveness then off you go to H-E- double hockey sticks. Jesus said that there would be degrees of punishment.

"That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:47-48).

Compare this section with Revelation 20: 11-15.

"Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."

From these passages I think it is clear that God will judge each man individually and give him his due punishment. That doesn't mean there will be anyone with a smile on his face. No, there will be universal wailing and gnashing of teeth. All the unsaved will be

in eternal torment. There will be some in greater torment though. All will miss heaven because of unbelief in Jesus Christ, but once there, each individual will experience a personalized judgment.

God is just. It would be unreasonable for Him to give Hitler the same judgment that he gives to the guy who works at Safeway who never hurt a flea, but was a sinner nonetheless. Again, that doesn't mean I want to be in the Safeway guy's shoes. Lost is lost and hell will be unbearable at best, but the Safeway guy will not be hanging out with Adolph. Hell is described as "outer darkness," so there will be no fellowship there, even of the damned. It will be utter aloneness and torment.

Someone might be saying, "How do you know that?"

Jesus said it.

Secondly, Jesus died to save sinners from hell. If there is no hell, then why did Jesus die to save a person from a non-existent place? Think about the extent to which Jesus suffered. If the solution to hell was that death on the cross, then the problem of hell must be unspeakably awful.

God is fair.

Be fair with your kids.

Be fair at work.

Point everyone to Jesus.

Rejoice in Jesus Always,

God's blessings reflect God's fairness,

Pastor Steve

P.S. Also take a look at Matthew 11:20 where Jesus indicates that certain people groups would be judged more harshly because of the light they had been exposed to, but had not responded to.

"Lost: When Bad Things Happen"

April 10 - Luke 13: 1-9

When I was a kid I witnessed a couple of upsetting situations that really scared me. Both seemed to happen, in my perception, in slow motion. I know now that it's simply how emotional shock and denial works. We go into an altered state of emotional protection in order to initially deal with the event that we are facing. At the time, though, it felt like a tense movie being played in slow motion.

The first incident was a car accident. My family was driving through a desert area on our way up to the mountains. All of a sudden, the flow of traffic came to a crawl. There had been a car wreck up ahead. You could feel your pulse begin to race a bit as you anticipated the scene. Some cars had pulled over to the side of the road to help, and others were moving by as they witnessed the drama of human suffering. I can remember seeing someone who was badly injured. This gal was on her knees holding her head as the blood streamed down on her clothes. I remember thinking how helpless I felt. My heart went out to her, but I could not help in any way. It was hard for a young boy to process a scene like that.

The second thing happened on a horse trail at a camp my family went to in the summer. It was dry and dusty and hot. We were all excited that we would have a chance to go horseback riding after lunch. The pace was steady, with a few places where the horse was able to gallop a bit. Up ahead a woman was bucked off her horse. She was the mother of one of my friends. The trail hand led her by us on the way to get first aid, and because she had received such a bad cut to her face it looked grim. The blood was mixed with dust and dirt and sweat and I can tell you it made me feel sick to my stomach. I can remember the anxiety I felt when I heard that someone had been injured. My mom was up ahead as well and for awhile I was afraid it might be her. But when I saw my friend's mom hurting my heart went out to both of them.

When Jesus is asked about a couple of tragedies He uses them to teach the most appropriate application of what to do when bad stuff happens. Jesus never skirted the tough issues. As a matter of fact, He had come to deal with the root cause of all suffering. His own suffering would put us on a course to eternal life in a place that has none of the traumas of our age.

It is human nature to try and find out the underlying philosophical reason that things happen, especially when tough things happen. Our minds cannot fathom that this event "just happened." We want to know the reasoning behind it. In John's gospel the evangelist tells of a miracle of Christ's where the disciples address this issue with the question: "Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus' response is similar to the one in our reading today. In that instance He says that it is neither, but his blindness would be in the scope of God's sovereignty so that God would be glorified. Then Jesus restored his sight.

In the events mentioned here, both the massacre by Pilate and the crumbling of the Tower of Siloam, Jesus says that they too ought to be ready to meet their Maker because in this life tragedy happens. Jesus does not indicate that it was the specific sins of the dead that had killed them in some kind of divine cause and effect scenario. Rather it was the result of general and tragic problems that arise because the present world system is rigged for hurt. Paul would later write that the whole creation groans along with mankind awaiting a day when these kinds of things wouldn't happen any more. Jesus' promise is that a day like that is coming. But in the meantime there would be horrible events.

Sin had not only separated man from God, it upset the God-ordained order that He had established in the beginning. The paradise of the Garden of Eden became the ground for weeds and strenuous labor

and relational problems. Since then tragedy has been the rule and not the exception. Death is the greatest indication of this.

Even the blind man who had received his sight would one day have to face the reality of his own death. In the meantime a great thing had happened to him, but that would not prevent him from reaching his appointment with death. All of our lives point to the end. When you get a book, do you sometimes read the ending before you start? That's an awful thing to do, isn't it? But sometimes we just can't help it. Well, the end of our story will be a death. What kind of death is up for grabs, but nonetheless each of us will get there eventually.

Jesus' use of the word "perish" is interesting. He tells the questioners that if they didn't repent then they too would perish. He wanted them to know that their day would come no matter what kind of a life they lived. Jesus knew that this present world would one day be folded up like a garment and put away. And in the old order there was a principle of suffering that would be universal. To perish would not be just physical. In a deeper way, He was saying that they needed to turn to God so they could save their souls from perishing. Suffering, to Jesus, was a reminder that we needed God's salvation of our souls so that when we perished we wouldn't perish.

You know the granddaddy of all Bible verses; you

know that one that sort of sums up the Bible: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him would not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). There's our word "perish" again. Perish does not mean annihilation. It means the loss of all that is of substance to a person. What a person loses perishes to him. When a person loses his soul, it perishes, not in the sense of non-existence but in the sense of not possessing it any more. To lose the soul is to be without the ability to chart your own course or decide your future direction. To perish is to lose the most precious of all gifts, the ability to choose God and live.

Jesus never taught the annihilation of the soul. He taught an eternal afterlife either in God's presence or without. There is no middle ground like purgatory, nor does He indicate that punishment will be limited for those who reject the gospel. That is why it was important for the inquirers that day to realize that the sufferings of others were a warning to them that they needed God.

All suffering points us to God. That was true of Job and it was true of Jesus and it was the case with Paul and all of the early apostles. It is true for us as well.

How do you suffer?

God's blessings will come to those who turn to God,

Pastor Steve

for you at the price of Christ's blood. But what we do with that gift will determine how we are decorated when we get there.

I just finished a book about Tommy Franks, the American four-star general who led the Desert Storm campaign, Afghanistan, and more recently Operation Enduring Freedom. General Franks is a highly decorated career military man who has shown bravery dating all the way back to the Viet Nam conflict. The ribbons and medals he wears on his chest were awarded after much sacrifice and heroism. He earned every one of them, mostly in the face of grave danger. He risked his life for the cause of his country. He did not receive those honors for joining the service, he received them for excelling at his duty in the service.

The door into Christian service is Jesus Christ. No one can enter in through any other avenue. Some have tried, Jesus said, but they were only thieves and robbers. They did not enter through the door God had provided through His Son. Once you do enter that door, the battle on the other side is often fought with spiritual dangers. Pilgrim found this out on his journey called "The Pilgrim's Progress." There were enemies and obstacles along the way as well as help from God's Word to guide him to the celestial city, his final destination.

We are all Privates in God's army. Fortunately, Jesus is the one who goes out ahead of us and secures our way. He is not only our example, He is our leader. Never a more trustworthy leader has there been. When a battalion of men leaves the safety of their barracks and ventures out into enemy territory, they must trust their commanding officer. They know that his experience and leadership will be used for the best interest of the troops. How much more confidence can we place in Jesus? He is a leader who has experienced all of the difficulties that confront us.

Jesus taught that we are to love those who cannot repay us. He minimizes the effort we put into making the comfortable, comfortable. Instead, He wants us to invite to the feast (his kingdom) those who cannot offer much in the way of payback. These, Jesus teaches, are the ones we need to include. How hard this can become, when prejudice and tradition and bias meet us along the way. There is no doubt that our traditions often exclude the very people God loves and wants to reach out to and love.

"But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (14:14). There will be a future payday. There will be a time when all of the unselfish acts of service that you did for God's cause will be rewarded. That is a good motivation to endure when we feel like people are taking advantage of us. That can motivate us to reach people who are not like us, but who need to hear about God's love.

What's ahead ought to help us now to do what Jesus taught. His promise of a future reward is good enough. When we start to believe that we need to hold tightly to what we have here, let's look forward to later and fight the good fight now. Whatever God has gifted you to do, go for it! Hit the road running, not expecting to receive the reward today.

Patience is a virtue.

Rome wasn't built in a day.

We may lose a few battles but we will win the war.

Follow me and I will make you fishers of men.

Delay gratification until the day your Commanding Officer decorates you.

God's blessings accompany those who keep company with the lowly,

Pastor Steve



"Pay Day"

April 11 - Luke 13:31-14:14

Think about these statements:

"Delay gratification!"

"Rome wasn't built in a ____."

"Patience is a ____."

"We may lose a few battles but we will win the ____."

"Follow me and I will make you fishers of ____."

In our world where "instant" is the name of the game it is difficult to withstand hardships and keep our eyes on the future prize.

You know that there will be rewards in heaven, right? Heaven is not your reward. Heaven was bought

**“Do You Not Have What It Takes?”**

April 12 - Luke 14: 15-35

I like to keep my options open. How about you? I like to hedge my bets. Are you the kind of person who can go “all in”? I like to have a bit left over just in case. I think I was raised that way or maybe it’s the “way I am,” I’m not sure, but I do know that total commitment has always been a difficult thing for me.

What Jesus says in this section of Scripture makes me a bit nervous. I know He’s talking to the “large crowd,” but I realize that He is also talking to us as well. He’s upping the level of commitment on our view of discipleship. It seems like He’s saying, “All or nothing. Come follow me and give up everything, or go ahead and go home.” Doesn’t it read that way to you?

Now I know that Jesus is worth following and giving up some stuff for, but to give it all is a different story. What am I going to hold on to if all I have in my hand is my “cross?”

Remember how Matthew got up and left his tax booth when Jesus called him to follow? The Bible doesn’t give us a whole lot to ponder when it comes to his point of commitment. It looks like he hears Jesus call him, and up he springs into a life of fellowship with Jesus. Wow! But some of us aren’t made like that. We like to keep other irons in the fire just in case. We like to make sure we have a Plan B. Just as Jesus called Matthew, He calls us to shift all of our loyalty and affection to Him even if that would mean hurting our relationships with those closest to us, like our parents or siblings or our own immediate family.

Jesus is saying that we need to shift from pleasing others to pleasing Him solely. For the person who is caught up in making sure everyone around him is okay this can be a welcome relief. I always think of that verse in 1 John where it says that Christ’s commands are not burdensome. If that’s true—and I believe it is—then what Jesus asks of us here in Luke will also fall under that category. To give it all up for Jesus means that we really find a freedom that releases us

from tyranny: the tyranny of this life’s urgencies, and the tyranny trying of to please others.

Let me also be quick to say that Jesus is not asking us to be mean or rude or condescending to those closest to us. He is asking us to shift our loyalties completely His way and then let the chips fall where they may when others respond to us. When you think about it, that is exactly how Jesus lived. He spoke the truth and presented the Father as He is. If someone rejected it, He didn’t chase after them and try to persuade them to follow. He invited others to follow and gladly received those who came to Him.

Jesus makes it clear that the cost of following Him is extremely high. If we come to follow Him we may lose everything the world has to offer. He said that as a king goes to war and considers whether he has enough men to win the battle, or as a builder considers whether he has enough in supplies to finish his shelter, we should consider the cost of following Him. When we come to Christ, it’s not what we have that matters, it’s what we do not have. It’s what we give up for His sake. It’s the relinquishment of pride and carnal security and religious traditions and self-righteousness and bitterness and strife with others and a debauched lifestyle.

No wonder Paul said we are a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). The old life, “our life,” “our will,” “our possession,” is crucified with Christ and then Jesus lives in us by faith so that we are assured He loves us and died for us (Galatians 2:20). Paul affirmed that we are now “servants of Christ.” There is really no effective fence walking. We must land on one side or the other and cannot afford to be salt without saltiness. That kind of thing is worthless.

If you are on the road of discipleship—and I know that you are or would like to be—do not fret when it feels like you are carrying a cross. Remember, he who suffers as a Christian is doing the will of God. Also

remember: if you have Jesus, you have everything you need.

Corrie Ten Boom, a woman who served Jesus all of her life and spent time in a German concentration camp during WWII for harboring Jews, always said that she held everything in her life with palms turned

upward. She didn’t want the Lord to have to pry her fingers away from the things that needed to be yielded to Him. And God used Corrie mightily.

God blesses those without,
Pastor Steve

**“The Lost Son”**

April 13 - Luke Luke 15: 1-32

Jesus is Full of Grace and Truth, Parables are given for a variety of reasons. Some, like the parable of the prodigal son, are meant to give us a view into the heart of God. How a person views God will influence the way they respond to Him. If you grew up with a mean ogre of a God, then you will live your life relating to Him in that way. I know many people who relate to God with a guilty conscience. They always feel like they cannot measure up to the demands of their angry God. They may even want to know Him and love Him but they are blocked by a barrier that is just too hard to get through.

I have to start with the very basic truth about God’s nature. John said, “God is love.” His love is infinitely greater than we could even imagine. The only object lesson we have to understand its depths is the old rugged cross. It’s on the cross that God is saying to us, “I love you this much,” (then He spread His arms). If I believe God loves me fully and completely, then I will respond to Him in love and live a life filled with the love that I have received from Him. On the other hand, if I have not experienced His love I will try to relate to Him on some other basis. This basis will always be inferior to the one built on love.

The story of the prodigal or lost son should cement in our minds the truth that God is crazy about us. He wants our fellowship. He wants to have a close relationship with us. He hates it when we are es-

tranged. He desires us to be connected. If we’ve been away from the shelter of the father and then return, God throws a party. He brings out the best of His kingdom and honors His son that was lost but now is found. Bring out the musicians, kill the fatted calf, bake the cake—we’re going to party and celebrate the good news.

This response by the father was not what the son expected. He expected that he might be allowed to work as a servant. “Maybe my father will let me work in the field with his slaves,” he thought. He came to the father humbly and with a broken heart. He had done wrong and hoped for forgiveness. But the father’s response blew him away. The father opened his loving arms to his son, welcomed him back, and then threw a party.

The lost son’s brother, on the other hand, had a stinky attitude. “How come all this commotion? What? I’ve been loyal and you haven’t thrown a party for me. How come the loser gets all of the attention? It’s not fair. How about me? I deserve this, but does he? I don’t think so.”

How about you? Do you need to come back to the father? What’s keeping you? Or are you more like the other brother? Have you seen God love others whom you don’t accept?

The parable uses story form to clearly tell us what God is like.

Take some time today to think about God's love. Think again about this parable and let its message sink into the nooks and crannies of your heart.

God's blessings are a grand party,
Pastor Steve



"Mammon"

April 14 - Luke 16: 1-18

Jesus is always so practical and helpful when it comes to our day-to-day living. He wants us to grow where we are and learn to follow Him in the humdrum details of life. Do you sometimes feel like what you do isn't significant? Do you dream a little too much about what your life will be in the future? Or were there glory days that you wander back to in the recesses of your mind? It is our nature to be antsy with where we are at and push too quickly toward goals that will take years to achieve.

Jesus says to take the responsibilities you have now seriously. Do them to the best of your ability and do not whine that you are not promoted to some higher status. Just be loyal now. Take care of the things on your plate and don't get bogged down in what tomorrow may bring.

How can you improve on your present tasks? How can you do them quicker and with more excellence? Which task do you too often avoid because you don't like to do it? Can you make plans today to put your hand to that task, do it well, and get it out of the way so that you can move on to other things? How do your responsibilities affect the relationship you have with others? Are you holding grudges or harboring a negative attitude toward someone because he does not have the same menial tasks that you have on your "to do" list?

Jesus says that the person who does a good job with his present responsibilities will eventually receive greater tasks. He will prove himself and then will be given other jobs to do. Is there room for improvement

where you are right now? Then work on that area before pushing for a promotion.

God has made you with purpose. You have talents and gifts from God that will enable you to do well at what you do. When you see your work as an extension of your job for God, you will approach the work with enthusiasm. You will do your work "in God" and not worry so much what people think about you.

You will also not obsess about the money part of the equation. We all want to make as much as we can, but the real question is: "Who are we serving?" We cannot serve God and money. When we serve God, He will take care of the money part. Oftentimes, we get so caught up in what we want, that we forget who we are serving. The job becomes a means to an end rather than a place to do God's will each day.

Love for money can start to eat away at our souls. There is never enough money for the person who lives with a materialistic bent. Never! A materialist is only as happy as their next purchase. And then their next, and their next, and so on. The materialist is self-centered. He dwells on what he wants and is not very concerned with what God wants. "My job is for my comfort and happiness. I live for the weekends and retirement." Have you ever heard that? That is a frustrated person talking. A materialist will struggle to find God because his god is reduced to a Santa Claus figure.

How about your responsibilities? Are you using your place in life to serve God? Would you like to focus on doing this more? Let's pray about what we

do, commit it to God, and ask Him to use us wherever we are: at our place of employment, in our neighborhoods, or in our homes.

Jesus made it clear to the Pharisees (a strict religious sect in His day who sought to uphold the law and the traditions of their elders) that their focus on money was wrong. Jesus told them that God knew their greedy hearts and that you couldn't fool the Lord. What was highly valued among men was detestable in God's sight.

The lesson for us is to simply evaluate our own attitude about the world's stuff. Then we need to move

toward valuing what God values and detesting what God detests. This is very difficult for a person who didn't grow up with strong values. Some of us sort of raised ourselves when it came to values. We picked up an idea here or there but never really knew how to construct a belief system. Now that we are committed to Jesus, our value system is challenged every day as we read His Word.

God grant us the courage to change to His way of thinking.

God's blessings lead to excellence for Him,
Pastor Steve



"A True Doulos (Servant)"

April 15 - Luke 16:19-17:10

God, Open Our Hearts To You Today,
Who wouldn't love to have great faith? Wouldn't it be cool to see God do great things through you? Jesus said, "If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it will obey you." Apparently great things are possible with just a minimal amount of faith. Has that been your experience?

The other day at prayer meeting we were talking about faith, and sharing stories of how God had helped us when we were in a fix. Things like helping us to find lost keys or lost hearing aids. They searched and searched and then in frustration said a prayer and remarkably, there they were. Someone told a story of being lost until finally he pulled over and prayed. Within five minutes he found his destination. These stories may seem petty, but I don't think they are. Faith is built one brick at a time. The bricks represent steps of simple faith when we needed God.

Jesus made the above statement as a response to the apostles asking him to increase their faith. Can you imagine living around Jesus and watching all of

the miracles that He did? Wouldn't you want a slice of that pie? I would. The interesting thing about this is the way Jesus defines faith.

Essentially Jesus says: If you want to have great faith, be a great servant. If you want to understand the dynamics of faith, change your attitude about who you are. Don't put the emphasis on yourself and your faith, but put the emphasis on the Master of the house.

Let's quote Jesus: "Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat?' Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink?' Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'"

Why is it that service translates into faith? Let's share some ideas:

1. When we serve we can really know the true needs of others. Then we pray with earnestness and faith for their help. We want their healing, and we take action so that they will be healed.

2. Service takes away a selfish motive for the results of the faith. The focus is on the Lord and not on the Lord's servant.

3. Service keeps God in right perspective. He is God and we are merely His people and the sheep of

His pasture. Faith is a gift of God and is the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). When we are busy serving God our faith will naturally and spiritually grow.

I'm sure there are more reasons. Can you think of any? In the meantime...

SERVE the Lord with gladness.

God's blessings rain down in the service of the Lord,
Pastor Steve



"Let's Give Thanks"

April 16 - Luke 17: 11-37

Hi there Friend,
I love it when my grandkids say "thank you." I am proud of them when I hear them say it to someone else and I am tickled when they say it to me. And I mean a spontaneous "thank you," not a "Tell the nice lady thank you, Sonny!" The words "thank you" express so much and are the magic words for making others feel good about themselves.

Jesus felt good about being thanked. He commends the one man out of 10 who expressed his gratitude for the healing Jesus had given him. The others went on their way. They were probably self-focused and were certainly neglectful of the simple courtesy of saying they were thankful for the miracle that had just happened. "Where are the nine?" is not something we want to hear if we happen to be in the unthankful bunch.

I wonder how much the Lord does for the common man from day to day that goes unnoticed. Sometimes people say that someone must have been looking out after them, but they have no clue where to send the thank you note. God just continues to love and protect and heal and work in the lives of people who are unaware of the source. But the lepers in the account knew who healed them and they still showed

no gratitude. Did they think they deserved what they got? We are not told. The lesson from the situation is clear, though—gratitude is the proper response to God's work in our life.

What has God done in your life that you are grateful for?

The Samaritan man who came back to give thanks praised God in a loud voice, threw himself at Jesus' feet, and thanked Him. At that moment Jesus was everything to him; Jesus was the focus of all of his attention. This is an important aspect of thankfulness. True thankfulness is a focused effort. It takes planning sometimes. It takes effort and energy to follow through when others are pulling us away. We could go with the crowd and continue to be "productive," or we can step back and plan to thank the Lord in some special way.

What steps do you need to take to offer a special thanks to God?

The thankful man was not worried about his own reputation or how the acknowledgement of Jesus would affect Him. He was more interested in giving the Lord the thanks due to Him. And so he was moved by an inward love and appreciation for what Jesus had done in His life. He wasn't looking over his shoulder at

the other nine. They didn't matter at that time. Jesus was the source of his help, and he knew that giving Him the honor due to His name was the all-important thing.

Do you sometimes worry about what others will think of you if you express your thankfulness to God in some excitable way?

Let's think of a variety of ways to say thanks to God. Our study of Jesus should motivate in us a desire to let Him know what we think about what He has done for us.

The Psalms are full of thanksgiving. Write your own psalm. Get a piece of paper or a journal and write out your thoughts and feelings of thanks.

Tell others about how you feel about how God has blessed your life. Don't worry what they will think, just give God the credit for the good things in your life.

Tell God. In prayer let Him know what you think about the things He has done in your life.

Give to others with an attitude of thanksgiving. Jesus said that as we have freely received we ought to freely give. It's in giving to others that we demonstrate to God our thankfulness of what He has given to us.

Mark verses that highlight things that you are thankful for. Mark them with a special color so that you can go to them and give thanks for the promise or attribute of Jesus that you are truly grateful for.

Collect songs of thanksgiving on CD or learn short catchy songs that will express thanks as you go through your day.

Plan a way to honor someone who has made a big difference in your life. In honoring them you will be saying thank you to God.

Find something to be thankful for in another person who is typically difficult to love. Then tell them you are thankful by writing them a note or giving them a call.

If you are married, point out something to your spouse that you see God doing in their life. Let's be thankful for Jesus in them.

Be thankful for God's Words. Relish in God's Words and tell God what it means to you to have His living Word in your life.

God's blessings flow through thanksgiving,
Pastor Steve



"Persistence Pays Off"

April 17 - Luke 18: 31-19:10

God Is In Control,

Do you ever get discouraged because you don't think God is answering your prayers? Have you been praying for something but don't see any changes? Have you felt like giving up on someone or something because it didn't seem like God was listening to you?

When things don't go my way I struggle. How about you? Do you sometimes get fed up with things not going your way? "But I've prayed about it and

nothing seems to happen. What do I do now?"

In today's reading God is telling us to be persistent in prayer no matter what. Jesus told the story of the persistent widow because he wanted the disciples to persevere. He says, "I'm telling you this so that you will not lose heart." Isn't it our tendency to throw in the towel? When we face obstacles, don't we want to wiggle out of the problem and be done with it? I love what the Message paraphrase Bible says in James Chapter 1: "Consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and chal-

lenges come at you from all sides. You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. So don't try to get out of anything prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way" (1:2,3).

Jesus wants us to keep praying; to hang in there and not to give up. Is there someone you've been praying for, and yet still you see no results? Keep on praying. Keep reminding God with your request. God wants to hear from you. As a matter of fact, I believe that is the number one reason for prayer—God wants our attention. He wants to speak to us and he wants us to speak to Him. It is in the closeness of that fellowship that God will answer your prayer.

Like any good Father, God wants to spend time with us. He loves it when I open my Bible with an open heart. He knows that He will be able to reach out to me and speak to my heart through His Word. At that point I can be assured that God and I will be together. There will be a palpable oneness. It is a special time with God that no human being can replace. God refreshes our souls, assures us of His love for us, whispers thoughts of commitment through His Son, and guides us through His Spirit to pray on target for the things that are on His heart.

Whenever we talk about prayer we need to remember the importance of God's will in our prayers.

The Spirit will help us to pray according to God's will. He will inspire our minds and hearts as we pray, so that our prayers will not be self-seeking but God-seeking. Make a note that the persistent widow was praying for God's justice in a matter. She wanted God to do the just thing on her behalf. Sounds like a workable prayer to me!

Don't get discouraged. Pray always. As you pray, God may change the direction of your prayer and at the same time come really close to you and bless you with His Presence. That is His Spirit working in your life and drawing you close to Jesus. Jesus said that the Spirit would show us the things He taught so that we could grow in our relationship with God and bear much fruit. What kind of fruit would that be? The fruit of the Spirit, such as love, joy, and peace. Awesome! See the entire list of fruit in Galatians 5:22.

Pray.

Get away to a quiet place and pray.

Don't let anyone, even yourself, discourage you from prayer.

Prayer is like spiritual breathing. How are your lungs?

Rejoice in Jesus Always.

God's blessings come through persistence in prayer,

Pastor Steve

teachers and administrators dealt with it there? I had compassion on him and would leave him a bowl of Kibbles and Bits around the back of the classroom. Not really, but he probably would have appreciated it.

Zacchaeus was a different kind of duck. You don't read about anyone else in the Bible who is quite like him. Like most of us, he too was probably looking for something to fill the purpose hole in his life. Most people would have looked at him and said that he was on the right track. But Zacchaeus had issues that were not visible on the surface. He was carrying a load of guilt that was not rectified by his outward success. That is true for so many in our day as well. What you see is not always what you get. Some people have issues that are bone-deep.

Something internal caused my friend Arthur to meow and something internal drove Zacchaeus to seek Jesus. Maybe he had a stature complex. Some small men let their height rule their thinking and they spend the majority of their life trying to prove that they are really a "big man." Think about how frustrating it would have been to be lost in the crowd, unable to see the Lord because of your diminutive stature. Zacchaeus was determined, though, and found a tree up ahead of the throng to climb. From there, he could view the person whom he had obviously heard about already. Now he had the opportunity to check Him out for himself and he wasn't going to let anything interfere.

Jesus responds to Zacchaeus's faith by inviting Himself over for the day. Zacchaeus's heart must have skipped a beat as he made his way down to Jesus. Take a look at this little man. He is wealthy, yes, but little in more ways than one. He is prostrate before the Lord; he must have immediately felt Jesus'

authority. Maybe his guilt in the presence of holiness bowed him. But then he gets up and declares that he will start treating others fairly and that he will seek to give restitution to those he had ripped off in the past. Jesus recognizes his faith and says that salvation resides in his house today. Oh, what a day! The day probably began like any other but before it was over, the little man had met a great man who gave him the gift of life. That was the day Zacchaeus grew up.

As usual Jesus is not moved by the opinions of others. Others may have felt Zacchaeus an unsuitable candidate for discipleship, but not Jesus. Some had written the little tax collector off—he was a this and a that—but Jesus saw his faith and came to him. Paul would say later, "By grace you have been saved through faith and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:8). Jesus identifies him as a "son of Abraham," most likely a reference to the faith of Abraham who believed God and was subsequently approved because of his faith. Again, Paul would say, "We are all sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ."

Have you ever said to yourself, "That person would never come to Jesus, they are too great of a wretch?" Remember Zacchaeus.

Have you ever avoided someone who was a "great sinner," or "successful," because they were so worldly and generally despised by most? Remember Zacchaeus.

Have you been inclined to avoid the topic of Jesus and spiritual things with some because they don't seem to be the type? Remember Zacchaeus.

God's blessings reach the riff-raff,
Pastor Steve



"A Wee Little Man"

April 18 - Luke 18:31 - 19:10

It seems like some people are born with two strikes against them. They struggle from the get-go. They veer off track in elementary school and stay that way for most of their life. All of us, from a very early age, are looking for our identity. We want to know who we are and why we are. Some people find the answer to these questions and others never seem

to. When I was a kid, there was a boy named Arthur who lived around the corner from me. Arthur thought he was a cat. No kidding, he'd hiss and scratch and make weird noises. I don't think I ever went to Arthur's home. Everyone knew where he lived, but we just didn't feel too comfortable around him. He'd display this behavior at school as well. I wonder how the

**“God’s Coming”**

April 19 - Luke 19: 11-44

The majority of people in Jesus’ day, especially the religious brass, did not recognize who He was. Jesus had taught that the Way was through a narrow door and only a few would find it. On the other hand, there was a broad road and many could be seen wandering down that path. Jesus regularly made Himself the basis for finding Truth and finding God. If you rejected Him, you simultaneously rejected both Truth and God.

Imagine a child growing up in a home where he never recognizes his parents. They brought him into the world, gave him a beautiful home to live in, nurtured him from the beginning, instructed him in the ways of life and expected that he would stay in touch when he left home. But he didn’t recognize his roots. Instead, he rebelled and lived as if he had no parents. He believed he could live life all on his own. Pretty soon the thought that he had a beginning was wiped clean from his memory. He didn’t even think to turn that way or seek to know where he had originated.

This is true for those who do not know their heavenly Father. God has been with each and every one of us from the beginning. He has walked with us along the way and has even given us signposts in order to see His works, but we have rebelled against Him and declared our independence.

Most of my growing up years I never even considered that I had a Creator. It’s not that I would have been against the idea; I just didn’t see how it mattered to me. I didn’t believe God could be known in any type of personal way, so I just lived for myself day by day. Growing up at the beach I was always drawn to the magnificence of the ocean. I loved to go down to the strand and walk along the sand and see all of the sights and smell the salty air. Sometimes my friends and I would go down at night and sit on the shoreline and watch the fluorescent plankton break up in the crash of the waves. It looked like a light show in the

waves—very cool. I remember sunsets and boats so dwarfed by the immensity of the sea. I especially remember the joy of bodysurfing, which we did for hours on end. I had all of that and still didn’t recognize that God was the source. I was blinded by my own independent spirit and attitude.

Jesus told the Pharisees, who were bent out of shape by the crowds lauding Him, that if these people stopped then the stones would cry out. In other words, this praise was ordained of God because He was the fulfillment of the ancient prophecies about the coming of the King riding on a donkey. Jesus’ kingdom took most off guard. The people expected a political king; they wanted a king who could bring God’s people out from under the yoke of Rome. Little did they know that Jesus was going to bring them out from under an even greater burden than the great iron machine of Rome. He would free them from their own sins and bring them to God through His own blood.

Jesus is moved to tears over the city that is oblivious to what He is about. He also has in His mind the fact that their refusal would soon bring judgment on them. They did not know the time of their visitation—that is, the visitation of God in Christ. Not only did they not receive Him, they adamantly rejected Him as a traitor and an imposter and a blasphemer. The claims that Jesus made did not fit their view of Messiah.

As a church let’s make sure to pray about the way we portray Jesus to the world. Let’s be careful that we do not project Him in a way that would not truly make Him accessible to those who are in their sin still and haven’t yet reached out to Him for their salvation. Let’s, like Jesus, show concern for our city and pray over it and ask God to open eyes so that people old and young can come to Jesus and have Him for who He truly is.

Jesus’ tears end in words of judgment. In His mind’s eye He could already see the troops, the Roman legions, surrounding the city and, with a force of military might, leveling the once Beautiful City, a city the Psalmist declared: “His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth. Mount Zion in the far north, the city of the great King” (48: 1,2). Why the judgment? They did not discern the Son of God but rejected their King.

How gracious can you get? The King of all creation shows up on His own stage so that we might get a glimpse of God. How marvelous are all of His works and unspeakable are His ways. And on top of that, He can reign in our hearts. Peter said that we ought to set apart Christ as Lord in our hearts.

Does He reign in you today? If not, would you open the doors and let Him take His rightful place? Today is the day of His visitation for us. He moves among us by His Spirit and takes residence in those who submit to Him.

“To whom coming, as unto a living stone; disallowed indeed by men, but chosen of God and precious,” (1 Peter 2:4). Peter goes on to talk about us as a part of God’s house, each one a living stone who is driven with thanksgiving to declare His praises.

Let the stones cry out!

You first.

God’s blessings could be shouted with stones’ voices,

Pastor Steve

**“Broken To Pieces”**

April 20 - Luke 19:45 - 20:36

While I was recently counseling someone, I broke down as I described the reason for the crucifixion. My question always has been and always will be, “Why did He do that?” I honestly do not understand why. Do you? Do you feel like you deserve for someone else to die for you? I don’t. What have I done to deserve that? Absolutely nothing!

In the presence of absolute love and goodness there are usually two kinds of reactions. Some people are repelled by it. They don’t know what to do. It makes them feel uncomfortable. They wiggle and they squirm and they isolate themselves because they know this kind of love requires a response, and they are not sure about how to respond. When I first heard about the love of Christ I was aware right away that this kind of love needed a response from me. I knew I was hooked. But I also knew there was no middle ground. I either submitted to it, loving Him back; or I went my own way, rejecting it. I knew I didn’t have

the option to be in the middle. His love requires a response.

I have heard many people say that the key to whether Mel Gibson’s movie *The Passion of the Christ* is successful will be the response people have. I agree with that assessment. The love of Jesus cannot leave us ambiguous to the truth: that He is who He said He was, and He did what He said He would do. Someone who concludes that “middle-of-the-road religion” is an adequate response to the message of the gospel is fooling himself. That is no response at all.

Jesus quoted from the Psalms a verse that indicated He was the main point of all faith, but that He would not be received as such. Then He went on to say, “Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, but he on whom it falls will be crushed” (Luke 20:18). The effect of meeting up with Jesus is a humility that reaches to the very heart of a person. What is broken? I believe it is my pride. Until I met up

with Jesus Christ I was self-sufficient. I didn't think I needed Him and saw God as a crutch rather than a rock. But when you are staring in the face of perfect love, all pride is broken and you are humbled before God. The Bible says it's like exchanging a stony heart for a heart of flesh. I was once as hard spiritually as a rock, but now that the Rock broke me, I am soft and pliable. When Jesus touches someone that is the result.

On the other hand, the person who rejects Jesus will one day experience the horror of being crushed by Him. It's like when criminals get caught. They are crushed with the knowledge that they will no longer be free to do what they want. Their will is restricted by the will of others. Some day "every knee" will bow before the Lord. Some will bow out of fright. That will be a crushing blow to them.

When Jesus had finished this teaching, the teachers of the law and chief priests were put out by

it because they knew Jesus was talking about them. You might want to go back to Matthew 23 and review Jesus' opinions of them. Their response is interesting; at this point they do not seek to arrest Jesus because the people were so enamored by him. They had some work to do to convince the people that Jesus was a phony. In just a few short days that time would come. Some hearts would break and some hearts would be hardened.

May you experience the love of Christ today.

I would love to see God surround you with such a presence of his love that you would be broken. Please spend a few minutes in prayer right now, and think about the love of Jesus for you. Remember His wounds and His words, "I have sheep that are not of this fold who will come to me through your word."

Blessed and Broken to pieces by a radiant love,
Pastor Steve



"All She Had To Live On"

April 21 - Luke 20:27 - 21:4

What makes you uncomfortable? What causes you to squirm a bit? What is it that someone has to say before the blood begins to rush out of your head? How about, "Would you please stand in front of the class and talk about what you did over spring break?" I'll never forget doing a report in the sixth grade with my good buddy, Tony Palombo; he opened his mouth and said that the bald eagle was our national anthem. The class roared and Tony had a puzzled look on his face. Standing in front can make a person freeze.

Some people have an incurable fear of tests. They may know the material pretty well, but put a test in front of them and it's all over. It's like a mental brick wall. They look down and see the words swimming in

front of their eyes, from one side of the paper to the other. If you've had this problem then you know what I mean. When we are tested, our anxiety level increases.

What is it about fully trusting God that makes you uneasy? Thinking about death can do it for some. Others don't feel comfortable talking about Christian morals and ethics. Some tend to have lingering doubts about whether they have ever really trusted God and consequentially have fears about their future spiritual destiny. And some find it difficult to part with their money.

Whatever your story is, I'm sure there is some area that you struggle with when it comes to placing your life in God. One of my favorite Psalms is "When

I think of God, I am disturbed" (Psalm 77:3; NASB). I sometimes feel overwhelmed with thoughts of God and thoughts of my own unworthiness. God, when seen for who He is and what He would do in us, can be frightening. That's true for me, anyway.

In today's Scripture passage, people are giving to the temple treasury. Some were putting in significant amounts of money and others more moderate amounts, but most of them saw it as a privilege to give to God's work. They believed in the work of the temple and, for the most part, gave with a good attitude. However, remember that Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that some of the religious rulers gave so others would see them as righteous. Jesus said that when we give, we should not do it to be seen by men but by God, and that we should be generous without meticulously scrutinizing every dollar we give. He essentially says not to stand in front of everyone and make a show of the counting of your offering, but instead reach into your pocket and give liberally without making a show of it. In our reading today Jesus has a perfect example of His teaching on this subject.

Jesus observes a poor widow giving her offering. She was only able to give a few small coins, a measly amount in comparison to the wealthier among them. But Jesus points to her generosity as an example of someone who trusted God fully because she gave her all. She didn't give for show, but out of devotion. She gave even what was necessary for her daily bread. Jesus said that she gave more than all. Obviously money was not the most important thing to her; God and His work at the temple were her priorities. Jesus calls attention to her as a greater giver than the ones who were giving much more.

We need to get into our heads that God is not in

need of our money. He is able to provide in ways that are beyond our control. The woman knew this and so she gave it all to God. She was dependent on God. She knew that the Lord was good for her next meal and that she didn't need to fret if there wasn't much money in her bag, or even if there was no money. God sees the heart and He reads our hearts and knows what is most important to us in every area of our life. That doesn't mean that we will not struggle with areas like money. In our "got to have it world," money talks. We think that if we have it then we are secure. Where did the widow's security come from? She didn't know, most likely, that Jesus was pointing her out. She wasn't looking for special recognition; she gave to God because she believed God deserved her all.

Does the subject of giving make you antsy? It does for me. I tend to never feel like I have given enough. How do you give back to God for all that He has done? I owe Him everything. And I know my issues stem from a life of needing more money to feel like I'll be okay.

If I gave more would I be poorer? If I give less will I be richer? How do you think Jesus would answer those questions? "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Jim Elliott, the famous missionary to the Auca Indians, said that before he was martyred while bringing the gospel to them. Are we going to be able to keep our money and our stuff? Check out the back of a hearse the next time you go to a funeral and see if it's there. We will leave as we came. In the meantime we have the opportunity to use what God has given us to further His purposes.

God's blessings fall even on those who squirm,
Pastor Steve

**“Spiritual Tune-Up”**

April 22 - Luke 21:5-38

The spiritual man in a believer is the center of his being. The spiritual man is the control center for the rest of the believer's life. His influence affects everything else. That is not to say that other areas do not also, in turn, affect the spiritual control center. If I break my leg and am dealing with the pain of that injury, it will more than likely affect my spiritual life. Paul prayed, “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being. So that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith...” (Ephesians 3:16, 17).

The Greek word used for “being” above is the word for “man.” The Christian has an inner man who is alive to God and through whom he can have a relationship with Christ. He is the central control for our whole lives. It is his influence that motivates us toward spiritual decisions that enable us to live a life pleasing to God.

The Bible makes it clear that our inner man can grow and be strengthened. God must energize him in order for us to bear the kind of fruit that has lasting results. Some people give their lives to God at an event and then they never take the initiative to grow spiritually. They stay stagnant. They never make any progress in their spiritual lives. Their spiritual man is spiritually anemic. And so they wonder why things do not work out for them and why God seems so far removed. Paul prays for the Ephesian Christians, that their inner man will be made strong by the Holy Spirit.

From time to time all of us need a spiritual tune-up. We need to have our oil changed and open the hood for an expert to look inside and make things run better. This is true with our cars and it's true with us as well. We have a tendency to get out of tune. Life has a way of knocking us off balance. Sometimes we

even lose our perspective on how to live well.

How about you? Do you need a spiritual tune-up? When was the last time you opened up the hood and took a look at what was going on in the engine of your life? Today may be a good day to do just that.

Our Bible readings will reinforce this as well. From Joshua's commission to go into the land and conquer to Jesus saying that His words would never pass away, we have a spiritual X-ray to help us determine how to run smoothly on all cylinders. Does this make sense so far?

Let's take a look at three ways to tune our lives.

First, as Paul says in his prayer for the Ephesians, we need to be open to God in prayer. Take a few minutes to pray right now. Open up the book of Ephesians and read out of chapters one and three. Paul's prayers there are a good model for us when we want to know how to pray for our own spiritual lives. Another good prayer is found in Psalm 139:23,24: “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” Open your heart to God in prayer. Ask Him to fill you with His Spirit and direct you as you pray for and about your inner man.

Secondly, make God's Word a greater priority in your day-to-day life. Let the Word guide you and speak to you daily. God speaks through His Word. Joshua was told to follow God's Word when he entered the promised land. “This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, that you may observe to do all that is written in it, then you will make your way prosperous and then you will have good success” (Joshua 1:8). Here Joshua was going into battle and God says, “Make my Word a priority. Follow it, don't turn from it to the right or left but obey everything it say, and you will succeed.” What a great promise. Do you believe it? God's word on your tongue will be a guide to you and

to others. You will be strong when you are strong in the Word. Today take up God's word like Jesus did. He believed it would last forever. All the stuff of the world would pass away, but His Word would endure.

Lastly, find friends who want to talk about spiritual things. This is absolutely essential. I grow when I share what I know with others. And we all need others who will encourage our growth in Christ. They can help us to see what God is doing in our lives, and they can help us back on track when things are tough. We need other believers who will spur us on

to love and good deeds. Our natural tendency is to isolate ourselves. God wants us to reach out to others for our own sake and for theirs as well. Who can you call today to talk about the Lord? I really enjoyed the fellowship in Jesus that the Passion movie provoked. It seems to draw us together when we talk about the love of Jesus. It gets us out of ourselves and on to God. Ah, a good place to be.

God's blessings tune us spiritually,
Pastor Steve

**“Sift You”**

April 23 - Luke 22: 1-38

Have you ever felt like your insides have just been wrung out? A few years ago a good friend died suddenly of a stroke, and I felt wrung out and strung out. Being in a situation like that with his widow and kids reminded me of how I don't like the whole idea of death. Maybe you have experienced a loss like mine in the past few months and can relate to feeling undone.

In Eastern custom sifting is: “a part of the process of winnowing grain consisted in the use of a sieve, by which means the particles of earth, and other impurities which clung to the corn during the process of threshing, were separated from the grain” (Manners and Customs of the Bible, p. 321). “The grain in the East is threshed in the open air, by being trampled under the feet of oxen or horses, or by means of instruments. By these processes the straw becomes very much broken; and, to separate the grain from the hulls and straw the mingled mass is thrown against the wind by means of a wooden shovel, or else a wooden fork, having sometimes two prongs and sometimes three, and a handle three or four feet long. This is the ‘fan’ alluded to in a number of Scripture

passages. The wind carries the chaff away, while the grain falls to the ground. The grain is sometimes sifted after the winnowing” (Same, p. 333-334).

I give you this bit of background in the light of what Jesus said to Peter: “Satan has asked to sift you as wheat.”

Crush would be another way to say it. Or maybe pulverize. Maybe this was reminiscent of Job, where Satan appears before God and asks to do Job in. Maybe Jesus knew that Peter could learn the same spiritual lessons in other ways. Peter's impending denial was probably in Christ's mind, even as He thwarts the Devil's desire by means of prayer. Notice also that the Devil had to ask permission. That should be comforting to us. Nothing his way comes our way before there is a divine nod.

In the book of Hebrews Jesus is pictured praying for us right now from His place of honor at the right hand of the Father in heaven. The writer says that He ever lives to make intercession for us. Think about Jesus praying for you. Has Jesus ever prayed a prayer that isn't heard and answered by the Father? You could say possibly in the Garden of Gethsemane,

but remember that Jesus qualified that prayer with the words, "Nevertheless, not my will but your will be done." Jesus prays for you, and His prayers will be answered.

Jesus would not allow the enemy to smash Peter. That includes even Peter's denial of Christ. Remember that the denial was very bitter for Peter. He went out from the courtyard of the high priest and "wept bitterly." He had let down the man to whom he had committed his life to for three solid years. Peter knew Jesus and loved Him and he only caved in at the end out of fear. Jesus prayed that once he recovered from this great failure, his faith would also recover, becoming a faith-catalyst for his companions, who also had acted as cowards.

Do you recognize Jesus' plan for Peter's life? Peter's story is not unlike any of our own. We all have failure in our history, don't we? We all have sinned and fallen short of the perfection of God even when we

really wanted to do the right thing. Remember, Peter lost the victory at the point of strong self-confidence. He had declared that he was ready to take on whatever struggle was upcoming. Jesus knew that he would fail, but He prayed for Peter that he could get up and lead others, others who were failures like him. We often talk about Saint Peter, but when you read his life it sure qualifies what a true saint really is. Peter was not a perfect person.

The difference was in Jesus. Jesus had prayed for him, just like he now prays for you.

The difference is always in Jesus. Jesus has a plan for you just like he had for Peter. So if you feel like a failure, get up and go strengthen someone else who feels like one. You will be doing them a favor and you will be blessed as well.

God's blessings cover those Satan desires to sift,
Pastor Steve



"Peter Remembered The Word"

April 24 - Luke 22: 39-62

Did your parents ever sit you down and talk with you about the potential pitfalls in the world? Did they warn you about the dangers of alcohol and drugs? Did they give you "the talk" about sex and encourage you to make wise choices when it came to the opposite sex? I hope you had that experience, because I'm sure those words have governed your life through some pretty rough waters so far.

No matter how well our parents, teachers, or mentors instructed us, I am sure that at one time or another you and I probably strayed from the ideal path. Maybe we were swayed by peer pressure or curiosity or even out-and-out rebellion. During those times, though, did you hear the words of that significant adult ringing in your ear? I don't know why, but

not only is it human to err, it is human to temporarily forget altogether what we ought to know.

Coaches know the frustration of working with players who are attentive when they are being coached, but then go out into the game and completely brain freeze when it comes to putting it into action. Nothing burns a coach more than when this happens. "Why weren't they listening?" he says to himself as he tries to make heads or tails out of the fiasco. If you can relate to any of this, then you can relate to how Peter felt when he remembered what the Lord had told him just a short time before he dropped the ball.

In Peter's case, he remembered a prophetic word that Jesus had spoken about him. At the time there was no way Peter ever imagined that he would end

up where he was—cold, nervous, incognito, obstinate, and ready to throw away all that he had stood for. But isn't he just like all of us? Don't we all sometimes veer too far and lose our bearings? Life lessons, the ones that really make a difference, usually involve bonehead decisions and mistakes that we end up regretting.

Raising kids works along these same lines. We do all we can to protect and guide our kids so that they do not fall into potential traps. You know, the ones we fell in when we were growing up. I often have to remind myself that I learned most of my lessons by scraping my knees. Maybe that's why the apostle John, writing years after the events of Peter's fateful night, said that he wrote so that we would not sin. Then he qualifies that statement with the reminder that if anyone sins, we have a go-between, the righteous Jesus who will appeal to the Father for our absolution through His own blood.

If you've ever fallen far, if you've felt like the biggest heel in the world, then you can begin to understand what Peter felt like. Just at the time of the denial the soldiers are leading Jesus out. Peter meets Jesus' eyes, and the word Jesus had spoken earlier comes flooding back into Peter's soul. He is overcome with despair and grief and that sinking feeling that life will never be the same. The fact that he remembered the word of Jesus was not any consolation. That very word Peter had originally denied to Jesus' face. Back then,

there was no way Peter would deny his Lord. But Jesus knew differently and spoke the truth to Peter. Now the reality of it was hitting hard.

Peter went out and wept bitterly. He probably went out to find a solitary place to cry. He was all alone in his sadness. He would not be comforted. He had let down the very person who had meant the world to him for so long. Watch him heave and wail and blubber. It is a pathetic sight.

Interestingly, when Peter writes his two helpful letters he says that he is doing it so that the church will be reminded of the words of the Lord Jesus and his own teachings, which he had received from Jesus. As he is writing, he knows his life is on the line because of the increased intensity of Roman persecution against Christians. He wanted to leave a reminder of the great value of staying true to Jesus and following Him until the end.

We learn from failure, don't we? The reason why we stress the pitfalls of life so adamantly to our kids is that we don't want them to go through the same pain we felt. Maybe if we are constantly being reminded of the Word of God we will prevent some of the unnecessary pain we create. God's Word will keep us in times of testing. The Psalmist said, "The Word of God in his heart, none of his steps shall slide" (37:31).

God's blessings attend those who fail,
Pastor Steve



"Many Other Insulting Things; Herod and Pilate Became Friends"

April 25 - Luke 22: 63 - 23:25

Recently at a funeral I was reminded of the tremendous amount of connections there are to one person's life. Think about it for a moment. Over the course of a lifetime one person has thousands, maybe tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of

thousands of thoughts, experiences, and memories. I think that is why we are so affected by death. The memories we have with any one person can flood our minds and bring back some of the physical sensations we experienced when we were involved in his life.

We humans are complex. We are all shaped by an assortment of different stimuli in our histories. Have you ever been going through your day when you smell a smell that takes you back to somewhere in your childhood? I have. It always catches me a bit off guard, but I relish the sensation because it reminds me of people and places from the past. What are some of your favorite memories? It would be fun to take some time soon and jot down a list of past experiences that make you smile. I'm not saying to live in the past; just think about it and appreciate it for what it was.

At the end of the Apostle John's gospel he says that if the potential books about the life of Jesus were actually written that even the world could not contain the quantity of them. Imagine that, a world overflowing with books about Jesus. As it is, the Bible has been the No. 1 best-selling book for centuries. Jesus' life was so rich and full of so many wonderful details that all of them couldn't possibly be recorded. If you are a believer, then one day you will meet the Word face to face; in that moment of eternity you will be able to fully appreciate all that Jesus is. Until then, the Bible says, we see through a glass darkly; we can only see a glimpse of what is in store for those who love the Lord and keep His commandments.

I love the way Luke fills in some of the details of Jesus' life. Remember that at the outset of his gospel his goal was to lay out in order the things that had been handed down by those who were eyewitnesses to the words and works of the Master. Luke has a way of giving color commentary on many of the verses we have already learned in one of the other gospels.

Far from contradicting one another, the gospel accounts perfectly harmonize with one another. They portray Jesus from different perspectives, but in no way do they trip on each other's feet. Instead, they together give us a full picture of the Carpenter from Galilee who came to revolutionize the world. Think of it as four artists painting the same scene from varied perspectives or angles, each focusing on the same object but in a different light. One may see something the other would not pick up. That doesn't mean that the other is wrong about his perspective, it just means that he is representing the object from his particular angle.

In Luke's account there are three statements that

I'd like to make a brief comment on before applying the passage to our lives.

"Many other insulting things" (22:65): The beating began early that morning; Luke says it is just before daybreak. The religious leaders took Jesus and began to humiliate Him. They beat Him (physical suffering) and they mocked Him (emotional suffering). Luke says that they were insulting Him left and right. Do you know what it feels like when someone has decided to hate another and it doesn't matter what he says or does, the hater is dead set against the person, attempting to belittle the person no matter what? Jesus said, "If I tell you, you will not believe me." They were already set against Him.

If we are going to love others, even our enemies, then we need to be careful not to assassinate them in our minds before we hear where they are coming from. As a matter of fact, Peter later writes that even though Jesus was insulted He did not return an insult. Rather, He committed Himself to His Father. Let's join Jesus and treat our enemies likewise.

"Herod and Pilate became friends" (23: 12): Common hatred breeds weird bedfellows. Here were two men about as egotistical as they come, rivals for power up to this point and probably not very complementary to one another. But now they have a common enemy, someone they can talk about and hate together. Where do relationships built on hate go? History is full of examples in this regard, not the least of which was the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center Towers on September 11, 2001 in New York.

Hatred is not a good motive for relationships, obviously, but think about how easy it is to get swept into gossip of one kind or another when the subject is someone whom you do not care for. The gossipy talk is appealing because it verifies your inward feelings toward someone that you have been struggling with. Let's not let someone else's hatred hook us in. Let's instead stand against such talk.

"Their shouts prevailed" (23:23): The crowd is not always right. The majority could have it wrong. The size of something does not always mean it's correct or the best thing. Let's not go with the crowd until we have heard all of the facts and know why we are yelling. Jane Fonda, avid anti-Viet Nam war advocate, has made public her deep regret for some of the things

she did and said back in those days. I wonder how many in the crowd that day who yelled "Crucify Him" were later saved on the day of Pentecost?
Love rejoices not in unrighteousness but in the

truth.
God's blessings are attached to the details of Scripture,
Pastor Steve



"Believing the Impossible"

April 26 - Luke 23: 26-56

Each of us has a built-in belief network in our minds. Maybe it was inborn; maybe we learned it from our parents or our childhood teachers. Possibly our friends reinforced what we now hold to be true. Could it have been a movie hero who somehow stamped in our minds the things we hold dear? Who or what built your belief system? Who inspired you?

Without a doubt, our parents probably have the greatest impact on what we believe. We tend to follow in their footsteps. Sometimes we rebel, but for the most part we are tracking with them through life. Their political views are usually passed down. I can remember a student of mine who took a stand for a more liberal point of view in the midst of a very conservative group of students. She felt like she was being persecuted but stood her ground anyway. I found out that in 1991 her dad was a campaign manager for Bill Clinton. The day Clinton won she had a sparkle in her eye and an "I told you so" demeanor.

My parents, grandparents, teachers, friends, and Christian leaders have all influenced me. I sat in class under a man named J.I. Packer and was enthralled by his thoroughness and love for the Bible. He had a huge impact on me. His book, *Knowing God*, continues to be a most influential part of my life. I think that the people we feel love us the most are the ones we allow to challenge our belief system.

Reading Jesus has been a challenge for me for many years. He has challenged my belief system at

many turns. I would have to admit that my first reading prompted a bit of unbelieving laughter on my part. "Okay, I'm trying to follow You and do what you say, but 'love my enemies' and 'lay up treasure in heaven and not on earth' and 'a look of lust equals adultery' and 'go the extra mile' are all new concepts to me," I was thinking. It has taken years for Jesus to invade my belief system. I had been an A student in the school of the world. Now I was trying to unlearn what I knew and replace it with God's truth. That was a tough adjustment.

I bring this all up because of the stark differences between the worldview of the Bible and that of modern man. The modern scientist believes in a closed system. To him, only natural laws that can be verified are to be believed. So when the Bible has the sun standing still or God hurling hailstones out of the sky or the sky mysteriously turning black for three hours in the afternoon of Christ's crucifixion, there is an immediate unbelief on the part of the modern cynic. Those things couldn't be true because they would be outside of our natural closed system. Those are supernatural things that cannot be verified scientifically.

If you, like me, have been raised in a strict non-miraculous thinking environment, then it is very possible that when you read accounts like the ones in our reading today, you're still trying to swallow the veracity of it. Is this true for you? If so, I think it's better to say so then to go along with it and yet doubt inwardly. Some even will make excuses for the Bible

and make rationalizations for miraculous events recorded in God's Word. They will say, "Well, that's the way they thought of it then. It was their way of making a point, but there were really no supernatural events. All things can be explained."

The problem with that kind of thinking is that it erodes the basis of our faith: the miraculous works of Jesus. If He did not supernaturally rise from the dead, then all of his words and the accounts of his actions are suspect. Our confidence in the accounts we read today is only as strong as Jesus is reliable. Is He reliable? Did He rise from the dead? Did His disciples see Him alive from the tomb? Did those disciples accurately account for the events in Jesus' life? If so, then my faith in these accounts can be energized and I can

believe God for great wonders in my own life.

When Jesus read or quoted the Old Testament He did so without criticism. He responded to the Scriptures with absolute belief and confidence. He was not swayed by man's reasoning, which excluded God; rather, He put His faith in the Words of God and let them be the compass of His life.

How could we do less?

I believe in the supernatural events of the Bible!

I believe in the miraculous power of Jesus!

I believe God is at work in my life today!

How about you?

Rejoice in Jesus Always,

God's Blessings are believable,

Pastor Steve



Day 117

"Look 24/7"

April 27 - Luke 24: 1-35

God's Grace is Unpredictable, I have been enjoying the gospel of Luke so much. It seems like re-reading certain books brings out new insights to the life and words of Jesus. Luke is so detailed and helpful in describing the last days of Jesus on earth.

The "Good News" became good news to me in the mid '70s. What about you? Have you also found the joy and freedom that results from embracing the Gospel of Jesus? Who doesn't want peace? Who doesn't want love? That's why the gospel is universal. Jesus said that we are to bring the good news to all people. It doesn't matter what a person's background is, every man, woman and child needs the Lord. Only through the gospel can a person find a relationship with God.

There are a few places in the Bible that are like a watershed over the rest of the Word. Those chapters are the source of the fountain that flows into every tributary from Genesis to Revelation. God constructed

the Bible to form a unified whole; there is a oneness in it that could have only been the result of Divine Inspiration. As a matter of fact, Paul's summary of the Bible is one of the key places to help us understand the whole: "All scripture is inspired by God (God breathed) and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16,17). The Greek word for "inspired" is God-breathed. He so orchestrated His Word that every line, every word is put there by the work of God Himself.

From time to time you'll hear someone say, "Men wrote the Bible, so it's full of errors and contradictions." When they are asked to point out an example there is usually silence. Sometimes there will be apparent contradictions that may baffle us, but time and again these misunderstandings are resolved by archaeology or paleontology or by new manuscript

evidence. The truth is that there is more manuscript evidence for the reliability of the New Testament than any other work in history. There are thousands and thousands of manuscripts dating back to the early centuries of the church. The issue of the transmission of those documents is also relevant, but it's not something I will take up now.

The most significant issue here is what Jesus said to the distraught couple headed out of Jerusalem on the third day after the crucifixion. I believe this is the most fascinating discussion in the Bible. Fascinating because of what is said, and also because of what Luke doesn't record. After the event is over, the couple remarks to one another, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (verse 32). They had not recognized Him. He had somehow prevented that from happening.

While Jesus is discussing the events of the weekend with them, he begins to scold them and then says, "Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter His glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning Himself (verses 26, 27).

Think about that. All the Scriptures talk about Him. All of them. For example, take the Passover story in Exodus. The New Testament identifies Jesus as the ultimate Passover Lamb. He is the fulfillment of the Passover feast celebrated by the Jews for centuries. We could go through all of the Old Testament and pull example after example of the things about Him hidden in the old scriptures. These are the things

Cleopas and his friend heard from the lips of the risen Jesus that are only referred to and not expounded upon. Oh, what a sermon that would have been! Can you imagine Jesus giving an explanation of the truths of the Bible that point to Him? I'm sure our response would have been like theirs. Their hearts burned.

This leaves us with a powerful tool for interpreting the Bible. We need to look for and glean from the Old Testament the things concerning the Savior. Jesus invites us to do this from Luke 24. That's why we always use the New Testament to understand what's going on in the Old. The New Testament will often explain what we read in the first 39 books. For example, when you read the story of Sarah and Hagar and Isaac and Ishmael in the book of Genesis you may not get the deeper spiritual meaning going on in Abraham's day. But when you read Paul's explanation in Galatians 4, you will be enlightened. In that example God shows that He was preparing a "Seed" through the line of Isaac who would be the savior of the world. Take a look today at Galatians 4 to see what I mean.

As the weeks roll along we will have more to say about these things. For now, I hope they will enlighten your understanding of the whole Bible.

God's Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

Rejoice in Jesus always.

God's blessings are hidden in the Old Testament,
Pastor Steve

P.S. Look 24/7 is a way to remember Luke 24:7.
Read that verse. It's the gospel.



“Lord, Open My Mind”

April 28 - Luke 24: 36-53

God Is Above Us,
Remember what we talked about yesterday in Luke 24? Remember how important this chapter is to understanding the entire Bible? Remember the impact Jesus had on the couple who was depressed because of the crucifixion? Remember what Jesus said the Bible was about?

Well, that is not all there is to it. After Jesus had appeared to the disciples several times He also explained to them the things that had escaped their attention before. Then we have a comment from Luke that should make us stand up and give attention. Luke said, “Then He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures” (24:48).

How many times have you heard someone say or have said yourself, “I just don’t understand the Bible?” To most, the Bible is a mystery. They read the words but don’t understand the truth in them. They want to have spiritual understanding but languish in spiritual blindness. They hear the word but are deaf to its meaning. They see others excited but can’t work up the same enthusiasm for God’s truth. Why is this?

The Apostle Paul commented on this question in I Corinthians 2. He said, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ” (2:14-16).

Paul is saying that spiritual insight is only for those connected to Christ. These people become spiritual thinkers and can understand what the Word means, because they read with spiritually-open eyes. I can remember when God first began to remove the blindness from me. I had in hand an old King James Version Bible my grandma had given me. It had a

zipper around it so that you could close it up, and when you opened it there was a musty smell because of its age. I recall sitting in church waiting for a service to begin. I opened that Bible and thought for some odd reason I was getting some of what I was reading. It was like God was speaking to me. That’s why I encourage people who are frustrated with the Bible to continue to read it. You never know when it will come alive to you because God is working in your heart.

“He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.” This implies that their minds were closed before. When we come to the Bible in our own natural abilities we miss the boat. Maybe you are a very perceptive reader and can really read with great discernment. So you approach the Bible confident in your own abilities, not leaning on the Lord to open it up to you. You will not get as much out of it. But when the Lord opens your mind, the Bible becomes a storehouse of riches beyond belief.

In the meantime, let’s pray that Jesus would open our minds to His Word so that we can understand it better and better. I think He just might answer a prayer like that. What do you think?

Lord, open our minds today so that we can know you and love you and follow you better. We are dependent on you for the ability to understand the meanings of your Word. Thank you for helping us in this way; we are looking forward to a renewed ability to mine the truths of your Word. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

God’s blessings open us to the truth,
Pastor Steve